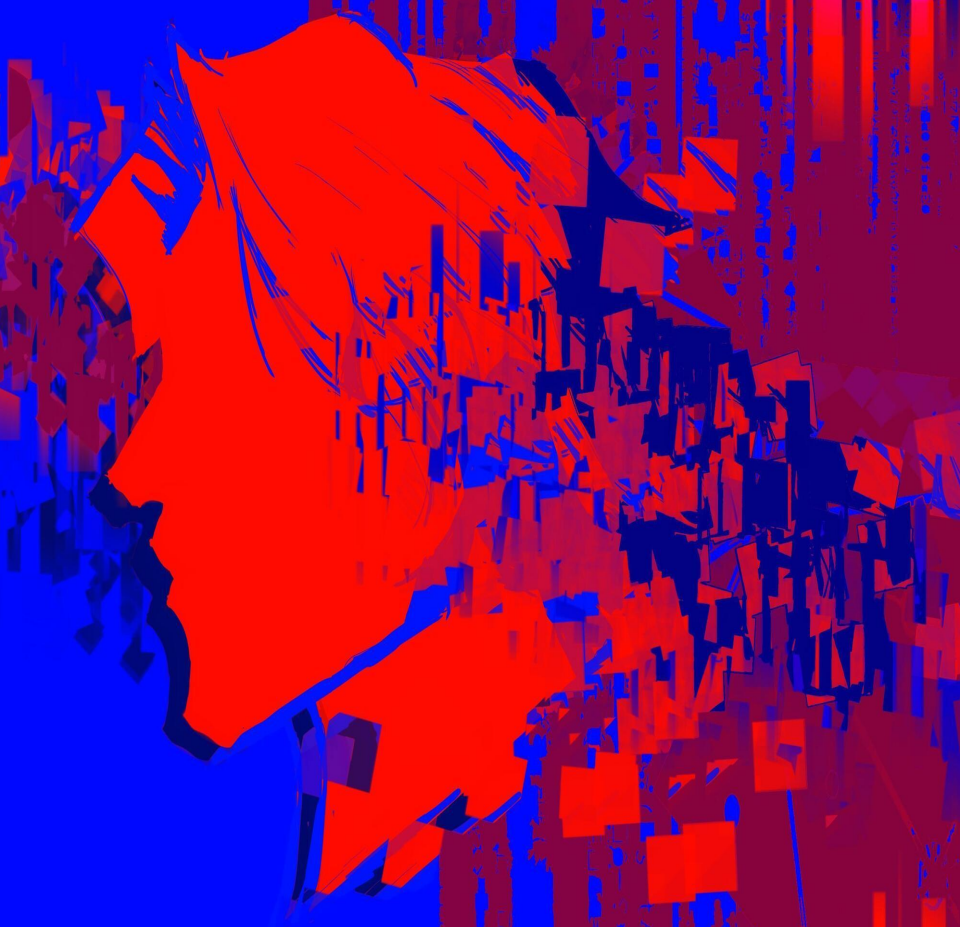


[THE_NET_DIVER]



[Franklin_Sami]

FRANKLIN SAMI

The Net Diver

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//The_Big_Job

As far as I know, I've lived in Manhattan my entire life. I've gotta admit, this place is a fucking shithole. The statistics for Manhattan are worse than ever. There isn't a city out there with crime rates higher than Manhattan or the rest of New York City for that matter. There are way too many people living below the poverty line. I'd say well over 90 percent of the population. Most of these fuckers are living here illegally anyway. Can't blame them since outside is practically a wasteland.

'Hey, Dias!'

'You're spacing out!'

'I think you had too much whiskey, buddy.'

I look up to see who's talking to me, and I'm seeing double, to be honest. My neuraware never really did react well to liquor. I've gotta get that fixed. Moving on, it's the bartender and owner here at the Sinner's Bar who happens to be speaking to me.

'Hah! Damn, you're drunk as shit man.'

MAX pulls a small tube out of his pocket as he's speaking. 'Want some zone? It'll sober you up!!' He always talks so damn loud. It's annoying, but I could use some zone before I call it a

night. I don't think I'll make it home if I head out as shitfaced as I am.

I look MAX in the eye and pretend I'm contemplating. After all, I'll look like a full-blown zonie if I say yes right away. 'Sure. Sounds good MAX.'

MAX opens the tube and pours a line on the counter of the bar. He made sure to wipe the counter beforehand of course. As soon as that white powder is exposed to the air, it begins to radiate blue luminescent light. That bright soft blue light is something I love to see before I take a sniff.

'Hell yeah, Dias!!' Of course, MAX gets enthused about this. He loves zone more than I do. For Cys like me, the addictive side effects aren't as significant due to neuraware enhancements. We get to enjoy all the fun without worrying about the dangers. As for Norms or Cells, zone works wonders too and to a much greater degree. It fires up their neurons and kicks them into overdrive, allowing them to concentrate and focus more, as well as handle stress with great efficiency. Norms and Cells become hooked with little hope of getting off unless they become fully enhanced with neural cybernetics like us Cys or go through intensive rehabilitation. Neuraware nearly gives us reign over our thoughts and synaptic functions. People can change how their minds are hardwired. Rather than rely on stupid shit like self-talk the way a lot of Norms have done in the past. All a Cy has to do is write a new algorithm and execute it. If you're someone who happens to be quiet and reserved, you can change that with a few lines of code and be as much of an extrovert as you'd like to be. If you've got anger or depression issues, you can change that too. That being said, the extent to which you will change your neural functions is dependent on the quality of your neuraware. Like any computer system, your neuraware

has limits. Lots of Cys like myself are always looking for the hottest neural tech on the market. I like to develop my own shit, however. I don't trust anyone with my brain. There are tons of renowned HET clinics out there. None of which I've ever gone to. Most of them are illegal and they almost **always** get busted. Imagine being a customer at one of those clinics and having your data preserved there. Because that's what those HET clinicians do. Your neural data is kept on file for the sake of research. There may be something in your synaptic patterns that they could learn from. Something unique that would help those clinicians build better enhancements for future clients. Or something that may help them build the next groundbreaking piece of technology. It happens all the time. When they get busted, the government confiscates all of the data they preserved. All of **your** data. That's bad for a Cyber Stalker! We like to lay low and stay off the radar.

'Dias! You sniffin or what man!!?' MAX is excited. He leans in and snorts loudly. I lean in and get close to that blue light. Then I take a sniff.

'WHOO, BOY!!! DAMN, THAT'S FUCKING GOOD!!!!' Some of the other customers in the bar turn their heads at us. MAX drew their attention since he was so freaking loud. So loud that they could hear his voice over the pounding electronic music that was playing. I exhale as I turn my head upward. Then I look back at MAX.

'Yeah. I can feel it kicking in.' My heart races faster and then slows back down. I don't feel as shitfaced as I did before. I get up from my stool and extend my left hand. I decide that I'll pay my tab with V-Coin instead of Creds as I open my palm and get my trans-plant ready to make a payment.

'V-Coin is okay right MAX?'

MAX is still zoning. He's really into it but manages to process

my question.

‘Money is money!!’ He’s still enthused too... and even louder than before. MAX can be an annoying dumb ass when he’s zoning like this.

He pulls out his trans-scanner from the shelf behind him. ‘200!’ He proceeds to scan my trans-plant after coming up with a bullshit total. MAX is clearly trying to milk as much V-coin as he can. It’s worth a lot more than creds are. Especially in Dark Spaces.

‘Cool.’ I see a transaction statement in my neural HUD. It says ‘-200 V-Coin from DV-Wallet’ (DV-Wallet stands for Dias’ Virtual Wallet). I shake hands with MAX.

‘Will I see you again tomorrow Dias!?’

‘Nah, I’ve got a job to do.’

MAX nods. ‘Well hey man be careful. They’re saying some crazy Cyber Stalker is wreaking havoc throughout the Net Space. It’s got Net divers afraid to go diving these days. At least in Dark Spaces that is.’ MAX only ever speaks in a normal tone when he’s concerned for something or someone. He was right too. I’ve been hearing a lot about it myself. A crazy unidentified Cyber Stalker has been breaking into top-secret databases and using the data they’ve acquired to take control of various Spaces or stir up trouble. Dark Spaces are in the most danger since they’re largely unprotected. Could it really be just one Cyber Stalker? This kind of thing would take a group effort. I’m pretty damn good, but I could never pull this off.

‘You hear me right?’ MAX asks in an unusually stern manner.

‘Yeah. They say this Cyber Stalker calls himself or herself Sinn or whatever. No need to worry about me, I only take small jobs MAX. That way I won’t stick out too much. This Sinn character won’t give two fucks about a small-time Cyber Stalker who likes

to chase small game.’ That’s right. Big jobs always involve big risks, which leads to big trouble. I’ve had way too many bad experiences. This is the reason why I went small time and live in the shittiest neighborhood in town: Chelsea. A tech hub throughout the 22nd century that descended into an extremely chaotic state.

‘Take care MAX.’

‘You too Dias!’ MAX returns to his usual tone of voice as he leans in toward that blue glow on his bar counter and continues zoning.

My apartment isn’t too far off. Sinner’s Bar is on 4th street and 8th ave. My home is 4 blocks North on 8th street. I look around and I see the streets hustling and bustling as always. Then I look down and see some blood. It’s trailing off to the southern corner of the block; ending at a body that’s laid out. Out of curiosity, I take the moment to activate my optic scanners to read his vitals. A red light begins to manifest around his body while I zoom in. My HUD begins to display text next to his body. It appears in red and says:

Condition: Deceased
Identity: Unknown
Height: 5'5"
Ethnicity: Based on skin tone and facial structure,
Middle Eastern or Hispanic
Cause of Death: Apparently beaten to death, and
dragged down the street afterward
Time of Death: Roughly 1 hour ago
Name: XX

The algorithms in my neuraware's programming got to work and they're on the cutting edge for sure. This was data gathered from a simple analysis at that. If I really wanted, I could find out everything there is to know about this guy. All the way down to his genetic makeup. I hear sirens blaring from down the street as I stand here pondering pointlessly. The sirens' sound came from an ambulance of course. It arrives and parks near the dead body. Two paramedic Bots come out of the vehicle and walk up to the body. Time for me to start walking I suppose. Got no reason to stick around and watch since I've lost curiosity over the issue.

Holo ads are displayed all over 8th ave and there are various kinds. There's a large holo ad of two naked sex workers dancing with each other; a male and a female. They begin to grab and embrace each other. Slowly rubbing their hands on each other's bodies as they make out. It had me thinking of my last visit to the red light district. If I had time I'd head over to the lower east side right now, but I've gotta hit the sack early tonight. Moving on, there's another holo further down. An ad for the SCTF: Special Crimes Task Force. It's a combat operative standing in his combat gear with a rifle in his right hand and his left hand pointing down at the street. At his feet, neon blue text with a neon green outline is displayed and says in caps:

BEWARE. COMMIT A CRIME AND WE WILL RESPOND WITH EXTREME FORCE.

I hate those totalitarian jerks. They don't give a damn about the people of NYC. All they do is shoot down anyone they see as a challenge to their authority. The SCTF has made things worse here, not better. But what do I know? I'm just a small-time Cyber Stalker, and I wanna keep it that way. As I continue

walking north, I feel a hand gripping my butt. I look to my right and I see someone I know all too well.

‘Hey Selena.’ I start to crack a smile, but I try not to be too obvious about my excitement. Selena Taylor is a really good *friends with benefits* of mine. A sex worker who is truly loyal to all of her friends and clients and respected for it.

‘What are you up to Dias?’ Selena starts to smile.

‘Heading home sweetheart. I gotta sleep early tonight’

‘Why’s that? You got a job tomorrow? You doing some Cyber Stalking? Or something else? Like gun-running or zone dealing?’

I look Selena in her glowing synthetic green eyes and put my right arm around her shoulder. She’s looking good tonight; wearing a tight black latex dress that cuts off above her knees. Some stripes expose her back all the way down to her butt. Fishnets are under her dress and these sexy black latex boots. She’s also got this really hot black collar around her neck. God damn.

‘You know I don’t do any of that other shit anymore Selena. Especially after that run in with the Red Crusaders gang.’ I look ahead and reflect on that horrible experience as we continue to walk. Selena slips her hand into my back pocket. She likes to do that.

‘Good. Cyber Stalking is what you do best you know. So it’s a lot safer.’ She exhales and nods while she reflects on that experience too.

‘That gang was gunning for your ass you know. I know you were returning a favor for Rigoberto and all. And that he’s a good friend who you go way back with but-’ Selena pauses and I stare at her face. She had beautiful big eyes, full lips, a soft jawline, and beautiful silver hair. A real babe.

‘If I weren’t friends with some of them, I wouldn’t have been able to talk them out of killing you. They owed me a few favors so I was able to leverage that as well as my friendship with them.’ I definitely owed her for that, but I could’ve handled them. Selena doesn’t know how prepared I am for those kinds of situations.

‘Yeah, I know. I know Selena. That’s why I choose to be small time. I made the exception for Rigoberto since he’s helped me out in the past. A mistake I won’t make again.’

Selena takes her hand out of my back pocket and pats me on the back.

‘That’s good. Remember to remind yourself that Rigoberto wouldn’t be where he is today if you weren’t there to have his back too. I swear, you never get enough credit for that and you don’t give it to yourself either. You should be rubbing in all the hard work you’ve done for the Sanchez Family in Rigoberto’s face every time you see him.’ And that’s why she and I are great *friends with benefits*. Selena always looks out for me.

‘When are you seeing Rigoberto again anyway?’

‘Tomorrow.’

Selena takes a deep breath and starts fuming.

‘Don’t tell me this job is from him!’

She’s worried and with good reason.

‘Rigoberto says that it’s a small job. He wants me to get straight to it as soon as I’m briefed.’ Selena seems to be in doubt. ‘He says it’s just some Cyber Stalking in a Dark Space. In and out. Simple.’

‘A Dark Space? Are you kidding me? You’ve gotta be fucking kidding me!’ Selena nods in disagreement and starts chuckling. ‘Dude, haven’t you heard the news? You’ve heard about Sinn, right? That crazy Cyber Stalker! They say this person has been

mind jacking Cys and Bots. Completely taking control of their minds and using them for infiltration to whatever end. He's taking over entire networks.'

I look Selena in the eyes again. 'You think that shit could happen to me? Come on Selena. I'm pretty good at this kind of thing you know. You said it yourself. In fact, that's an understatement. I'm damn good.' I say this to her, but she is right though. This Sinn person, or whoever they are, is certainly someone to be wary of.

'I'll admit, I am curious as to who this person is. It can't be just one person. No individual could do this much, no matter how good they are.'

'It could be a group. Yeah, that makes sense Dias. Even more reason for you to be worried you know. Collective thinking is more effective than individual thinking as seen in all societal structures.' Selena can be pretty smart sometimes. She actually has a BS in Net Space Development but became a sex worker since it was easy and fun. With the right combination of gene editing and cybernetics, it's impossible to catch STDs now. She's equipped with the right neuraware and bodily cybernetics necessary for self-defense in case she has to deal with a creep. So why not go into sex work? I did some sex work myself decades ago, but Cyber Stalking always calls you back. So here I am.

'Well, here's my stop.'

Selena pauses. It looks like she's getting ready to say something important.

'Look, Dias. Don't take any more jobs from Rigoberto. He's a good guy and all, but he always drags you into some crazy shit. He is a son of the Sanchez Crime Family. No job from them is a small one. They're as big as it gets.'

Selena kisses me on the cheek and starts to walk away. 'I'll

keep that in mind, Selena!’ I walk into the apartment complex. The main plaza on the 1st floor is rather occupied. At the center is a bush with roses popping out from it. A group of people is standing around it. Looks like they’re enjoying drinks together. They look at me as I walk past them. I give them a nod and one of them wave back at me.

‘Yo! What’s up, Dias?’ The one who waved was rather jovial. It was Hwang. A gay SCTF operative who lives in the apartment across the hall from me. Basically, my annoying neighbor. I wasn’t paying attention when I nodded at these guys. If I did, I would have ignored them. Damn it.

‘Fuck off.’ I can’t stand SCTF scum.

‘Oh come on. You know you’ve got the hots for me man!’ Hwang is getting ahead of himself as always and starts smiling. His whole group of buddies must be operatives too. What an eyesore.

I continue to walk up the stairs as I start to ignore them. My apartment is on the 2nd floor and the hallway is a mess. Broken bottles are scattered about on the floor along with spilled zone and other drugs too. I step on a few pills as I walk towards my door. Since the hallway is dead silent, the sound of me stepping on pills was rather loud. I look at the camera on my door as it performs a facial recognition scan. It’s a secure smart door that’s interlinked with my neuraware. My HUD displays a translucent blue box with darker blue text outlined in white on the upper right corner of my sight.

```
...loading...  
...loading...  
...loading...
```

...done...
Dias Velez
29 years old
5'9"
Owner Of Apartment 2B
Tuesday
02/05/2204 AD
1:02 am
...opening...

My front door clicks loudly. It's unlocked. I walk right in and head straight for the couch. I've got a pretty decent set up here. It's actually a studio apartment, and my bed is off to the far right near the exit to the balcony. From the balcony is a pretty clear view of the plaza, but I'd rather not take a look outside since that douche Hwang is there. I hear a pinging sound going off. Looks like I'm receiving a call. It's Rigoberto; guess that call should be answered.

Brilliant light begins to manifest in front of me. It takes on a humanoid form. The holo becomes clearer and clearer and begins to take on Rigoberto's image as it goes into full motion.

'Yo.' It's Rigoberto. Standing there with his arms crossed in a black sporty business suit that cuts off at the forearm.

'We gotta talk man. Like now. It's about tomorrow's job.'

'I'm all ears.'

'I need you to start early, so I'm gonna brief you a little bit.' Rigoberto says rather impatiently. 'For starters, the job isn't actually for me.'

'Is that so? Then who needs my skills?'

Rigoberto takes a deep breath. 'Howard Graves.'

It took me a moment to process what he said before giving

a reply. 'The Howard Graves? The CTO of Gamble Industries? Rigo, you know I only take small jobs.'

'I know, but I promised—'

'I'm not interested.' I abruptly interrupt him. 'I'm not interested in taking big jobs. Too risky. Remember last time? That last job that you said was supposedly small. The one from last year? The one which nearly resulted in me going at it with a notorious street gang?' I started to get pretty worked up.

'That **was** a small job Dias but you took it too damn far.'

'Really? How do you figure that?'

'You copied a private algorithm of theirs and added it to your neuraware for your own use. I'll admit that you made impressive use of it too. What was it? A combat algorithm? One that increases frontal lobe efficiency and muscle reaction time? As if you didn't have that prior to—'

'Okay, okay. So what if I did do that?' I interrupted Rigoberto again.

'They had no proof that it was me, so they had no reason to—'

'They're gangsters Dias! And they were pretty fucking pissed that you went in and stole their shit!' This time I was interrupted.

'Logic won't apply to them in a situation like that man! They weren't gonna wait until they found proof before they decided to kill you! For all the Crusaders knew, you could have been affiliated with the Reavers! You're really lucky Selena was able to work things out with them. Oh, and by the way! For some reason, she blames me for what happened with you and the Crusaders!' We both got silent for a few seconds. I guess he was right. Maybe I really did take it too far?

'Look man, Howard said he needed the best talent that money could buy. I told him about you.'

‘You what?’ This motherfucker.

‘Rigo, this guy could start bothering me himself. You do realize that right? I don’t need that kind of attention right now.’

‘I told him about you Dias, not who you are. There’s a difference. I know how much you value your privacy.’ Rigoberto pauses and stares at me intently. I can’t make out his thoughts with a blank expression like that. His aviators make it even more difficult too, but I can see his blue eyes illuminate from time to time. One of the few cybernetics he has. You see, Rigoberto is a Cell. Cell is the slang term we use on the streets for people who are primarily enhanced with gene editing tools. Some people like to enhance their bodies with a combination of cybernetics and gene editing. Of course, nobody can be considered a Cy unless their bodies are entirely replaced with cybernetics, they’re otherwise still considered Cells. I’m a pretty good example of an advanced Cy. I spent years working on my body and I love to upgrade myself with anything that’s on the cutting edge. My cybernetics are designed by me for the most part, but sometimes I steal other people’s shit and tweak it for my body. That being said, Rigoberto and I did not acquire our enhancements legally. We’re both heavily enhanced with unregistered cybernetics and gene editing. Most Cys and Cells usually are these days. Especially in this city.

‘Since when were you buddies with executives huh? I thought the Sanchez Family hated megacorporations.’

‘My father does.’

‘And you don’t?’ I was a little bit surprised. Hell, I can’t stand em.

Rigoberto scratches his beard. ‘Not as much as my dad at least. I can look past my differences with them.’

‘What kind of relationship do you have with this guy?’ I asked

him with obvious curiosity.

‘Howard and I have a pretty good arrangement. We exchange data and intel.’

‘Regarding what?’

‘I tell him what’s hot and trending on the black market and which Dark Spaces he could reap profits from and in exchange for that, he shares intel regarding the SCTF.’

Rigoberto is giving a lot more than he’s receiving in this arrangement.

‘Seems like an uneven exchange to be honest.’

‘Under normal circumstances, yes. But the SCTF has been moving in on us hard.’ He’s talking about a big bust the SCTF made a week ago. A warehouse prioritized for weapons storage. It was a rather substantial loss for the Sanchez Crime Family, but they’ll recover from it. I know these guys well; they’re too big to fail.

‘The SCTF is no joke. They’re an elite task force.’ Rigoberto scratches his forehead.

‘In any case, I’m working on building a solid professional relationship with this guy. Howard has a lot of connections. It would do good for the Sanchez Family to have a network in the corporate world, despite what my father feels.’

‘So I’m some kind of bargaining chip?’

‘Hey man, you owe me you know? I helped set you up with that body and identity 29 years ago. You wouldn’t be where you are today if not for-’

‘Bullshit!!’ Rigoberto started to get under my skin. We go way back, and we both have paid each other back in full.

‘Rigo, I’ve covered for your ass just as much. I had a hand in getting the entire Sanchez Family to the position it’s in today here in the city. As I said, I’m done working big jobs. I used to

take clients like Howard Graves all the time. I've changed bodies and identities so many times too. Always changing nationalities and gender. You know, I can't even remember who I originally was. I don't know my actual age. The only thing I'm actually sure of is the fact that I'm pretty damn old. As a small-time Cyber Stalker, I don't have to worry about getting into crazy shit like that anymore.' I took a moment to breathe. He worked me up a bit.

'You're right Dias. I don't blame you. But..' Rigoberto paused again. 'Are you really happy Cyber Stalking for crappy little startups and small businesses? The reward is big.' Rigoberto makes open gestures with his hands. '2 billion Creds, and 5 billion V-coins. V-coins man! They're twice the value in Dark Spaces.'

That perked my ears quite a bit, but I made sure not to be obvious and kept my cool.

'Alright, alright. I'll talk to him at least. Set up a time and a place. If his shit stinks a lot, I'm going right out the door.'

It's 7:25 am right now. It's cold. I'm standing next to a pole at Morningside Park as the precipitation of snow gets heavier.

Cybernetic fibers that are woven into my muscles are producing more heat, causing me to grow hungry. At least I'm warm though. Rigoberto stands next to me and starts zoning. He's resistant to the cold too, but his resistance functions differently. His leather coat is adding an extra layer of warmth, plus the zone keeps his mind off of the weather. Rigoberto used to be a full-blown zonie a few years ago. He's taken anti-addiction drugs to curb his addiction over the years. That being said, Rigoberto can enjoy zone without becoming hooked the way he used to be.

'Morningside Park is usually pretty empty at this time of the

day. It's due to the outbreak that passed.' He puts his tube of zone away. 'The Blue Rush.' It was an outbreak that resulted from a stronger airborne strain of zone being released by the Red Crusader's a year ago. Cells and Norms went insane from the overstimulation of their brains. They got incredibly violent and then died within hours of infection. Even Cys suffered some damage, but they didn't lose their shit and die though. Assuming they had really good neuraware. The Red Crusaders are a religious gang and believed that they were doing God's work. What a load of crap.

'There he is.' I noticed Howard standing at a fair distance from us; looking exactly as he does in his lame holo broadcasts. The distance between us is populated with several holo ads floating about, and a few surveillance Bots kinda just hanging around. It looked like Howard was observing us. 'He loves to watch people doesn't he?'

Howard begins to walk towards us.

'It's good to see you.' Rigoberto says calmly.

'Is this the guy? The Cyber Stalker you spoke highly of?' Howard's voice was deep and unnerving. It must be a vocal enhancement. Corporate executives like to get enhancements like that. It helps them gain dominance in social and business settings.

'Yeah. Dias Velez.' Rigoberto responds calmly, but I can tell he's faking it. I don't need to use my optic scanners to see his body grow tenser when he's this obvious.

'I've never heard of you, Dias Velez.' Howard responds in a very skeptical manner and crosses his arms.

'Maybe I'm just that damn good?'

'Or Dias Velez is an alias.' Howard says as he makes unwavering eye contact with me. The guy means business. He's got that

traditional corporate look that adds to his stern demeanor. Black slicked-back hair and a dark grey trench coat with a business suit that has 21st century corniness written all over it. Dias Velez is my nth identity, but calling it an alias wouldn't be too far off either. It is common for veteran Cyber Stalkers to have aliases or past identities.

'It might be, but I wouldn't share that with you. I'm not your buddy so you'll just have to trust what Rigo told you about me.'

Rigoberto steps in. 'Forgive Dias. He's a rather abrasive individual, but my opinion of his skill still stands. If you want the best that money can buy as you said to me; then he's it.' I've never heard Rigoberto brag about me like that. It was awkward. 'You might know Kenji Albom. Well, that was Dias' previous identity 30 years ago.'

'Rigo! What the fuck man!?' So much for valuing my privacy. Kenji was the last identity I went by and it was a roller coaster of a life. I pulled a big stunt on Gamble Industries' financial accounts, and I was doing a lot of wet work for the Sanchez Crime Family too. I drew way too much attention and never had any peace. This is why I became Dias Velez.

'You're Kenji Albom? The Cyber Stalker who helped shape the Sanchez Crime Family into what it is today? You were all over the news you know. I was a kid watching all of that.' Howard was surprised.

'You hacked into Gamble Industries' financial accounts and stole a lot of money. You then proceeded to give that money to poor institutions across New York. People referred to you as a new-age Robin Hood. Hell, kids would play games and pretend to be you.'

'Were you one of them?' I said as I cracked a wide grin.

'No. I didn't care about your nonsensical heroics. What

impressed me the most were your skills. I don't know how you did it, but it was remarkable.'

'Look, let's head to a warmer spot. There's a cafe nearby. It's a lot more conducive for conversation and I don't wanna freeze my dick off.' Rigoberto said as he started walking ahead of us.

The Cafe was really cozy and it wasn't very occupied considering the time of day. Rigoberto and Howard still had their coats on. I guess they were still feeling a bit cold. Howard sips coffee from a mug as he prepares to brief me on this job. Meanwhile, I just took that last bite of the sandwich I ordered.

'The reward I'm offering is big. I'm assuming Rigoberto told you already.'

'Yeah. I want more. If I'm going to risk my neck for you, it's gotta cost more.' I lean forward to show him how serious I am.

'Okay. How about 3 billion Creds and 6 billion V-Coins? A substantial increase wouldn't you agree?'

Howard puts his mug down on the table between the three of us and turns his head toward me while he sits to my right. Rigoberto decided to add his two cents.

'Dias, that's a small fortune you know. You're lucky he's even willing to increase it.' I nod in agreement with Rigoberto and stare at Howard.

'Start briefing me.'

Howard takes another sip of his coffee and leans back then crosses his legs. 'I need you to hunt down an AI.'

'Hunt an AI?'

'Yes, a runaway AI that the Gamble Industries' AIR&D team had been working on for quite some time. It is very, very advanced and dangerous. This AI has continued to evolve since breaking free.'

‘That’s fascinating, but all I can do is track it down, not hunt it. Cyber Stalkers don’t hunt; we do surveillance, infiltration, and observation. A guy like you should know this.’

‘Indeed, that is the job of a Cyber Stalker; but a man with a sense of justice like Kenji Albom would feel obliged to hunt this particular AI though.’

I raised my right eyebrow in curiosity. Rigoberto leaned in and shifted his body towards Howard, who had been sitting across from me.

‘And why’s that?’ My curiosity intensified.

‘This AI goes by the name of Sinn. I’m sure you’ve seen the news. I know you’ve heard about it. A heroic guy like yourself; like Kenji Albom, wouldn’t sit back and let a rogue AI terrorize innocent Cys and Bots.’

‘First off, I’m Dias Velez now, not Kenji Albom; and second, I’m not a hero.’

For some reason, Howard smiled after I said that. Then that smile became a chuckle. Why is he finding this funny?

‘You’re not at all what I expected the infamous Kenji Albom to be like. There are stories of you back at Gamble HQ. Horror stories. I expected you to be this large towering individual. One with a frightening personality. That’s probably how you were.’ Howard’s chuckling subsides. ‘Moving on, Sinn is actually an alias. The AI has taken on a male persona and has named itself Prometheus.’

‘Like in Greek mythology? That’s cute.’

‘Yes. He sees himself as a creator of sorts. One who steals fire from the Gods.’

‘Those Gods being megacorporations like Gamble Industries I take it?’ I respond promptly and coldly. These megacorporations see themselves as such.

‘The Cys and the Bots he mind jacks, they’re the fire of the Gods in a metaphorical sense. Objects that are the result of man’s ingenuity the same way fire came from the ingenuity of the Gods.’ That statement just fortified my opinion of them. Howard becomes even more stern, uncrosses his legs, and leans in. ‘Unregistered technology that was manufactured by Gamble Industries over the course of the 22nd century. Technology that was stolen from us by petty dealers and sold off onto the streets.’

‘Right.’ My disagreement was easy to see since I leaned back and crossed my arms. There was a time where I was one of those dealers.

‘I can’t continue briefing you right now. I’m starting to see that this place is too public.’

Rigoberto stands up. ‘Excuse me guys, I gotta go take a piss.’ He walks away from his chair and heads to the men’s room in the corner down to the left of him.

‘Tonight then. You and I could meet in the Net Space. Whichever you prefer Howard.’

‘So does that mean you’re in?’ Howard makes strong eye contact. His eyes illuminate a blue light like Rigoberto’s. I think he’s using his optic scanner to gauge my interest as I get ready to respond. He puts up a good poker face, but I’ve had my optic scanner active the whole time. Blood-red light glows from my eyes whenever I do and I’d seen how much his body shifted throughout our conversation. All the way down to the twitching and spasmodic movement of his muscles. He’s tense. Desperate. This Prometheus AI has him nervous and cornered it seems and I’ve probably become his best hope of handling this thing. His desperation is understandable. The Cyber Stalker known as Sinn has been viral for quite some time. Every day there’s a story about him being broadcast by True Media. He’s

always mind jacking innocent Cys and Bots in large numbers and these days, members of the Red Crusaders have been his prime targets. Crime rates have nearly doubled as a result of the chaos he brought forth. I haven't retained much of the data from my previous life, but I can feel the emotions that I once had resurfacing right now. The large reward for the job adds incentive for sure; but In my past life as Kenji Albom, I would have gone after this son of a bitch in a heartbeat. Reward or no reward. Within a millisecond, I deactivate my optics.

‘Sure Howard, I’m in.’

//Prometheus_And_The_Logan_Algorithm

I head over to my mirror to get a good idea of how my body looks. Not many people get the same sense of satisfaction that I do when they stare at themselves. Most people become insecure and decide to go for more enhancements. True Media just covered a story about this and it went viral. I think the article was called '*Even when we've achieved perfection*' by Walter Price. Wait, that's not it. It was '*Even perfection is not enough*'. Moving on, I get a good look at my tan-skinned body. My dark gray medium length hair is slightly curled after I combed it with some oil. My red eyes look rather stylish and intimidating. Kinda like that 20th century film '*The Terminator*'. That movie was awesome, but it's too farfetched of a prediction when it comes to what cybernetics has done to the world(the world is way more fucked up than that!). I could see crevices on my face from the cybernetics. There's a small jack on each cheek and the same goes for my neck. Crevices from cybernetic enhancements can actually be seen throughout my torso and so on. My body was engineered and upgraded over time. It's probably the best

that I've had yet and I don't plan on disconnecting from it any time soon. I hear a ping sounding off. It's a text message from Howard. I open it using the holo projectors in my apartment. It says 280-2498-4500045. It's the NL(Net Link) of the Space he wants to meet at. 280s are usually open Spaces. Awfully risky, because this is classified information he's about to share with me. I initiate a Net dive from where I stand. Bright pixels begin to manifest all around me. They get clearer and clearer. I'm eventually surrounded by light and it's a mixture of various colors like blue, red, white, orange, etc. It's my own private space that I'm standing in. The colorful environment sort of resembles a nebula. It was a bullshit theme that I put together. I need to get dressed before I set out to enter the Space that Howard sent me the NL for. So I open my virtual closet and look through my clothes. I select a sporty and badass look. Black sneakers, blue jeans, and a black v-neck with a crimson red leather jacket over it. Shortly after that, I dive into the Space that Howard sent me the NL of.

Net diving is something I love to do. I never get tired of the transition from the base reality to a Net Space. Everything goes black, and then all you see is a surge of bright machine language code rushing towards you and it's beautiful. When the process is finished, I find myself standing in what seems to be a subway. I look at a sign that says 'Columbus Circle', then I walk towards the stairs leading to the streets. It seems like this Space is some kind of alternate version of NYC, and there are just Norms here. No Cys, no Bots, and no Cells either. Just Norms. The streets also look rather clean too, at least compared to the city that I know. I could even get a clear view of the blue sky above me, rather than the clutter I'm so used to seeing. No floating surveillance Bots

or wires that are integrated into the complex architecture of the buildings and no sky plate either.

‘This is 21st century New York.’ I quietly say to myself, thinking out loud.

The entrance to Central Park South and 59th was ahead of me, so I decided to walk there and take a seat on a bench. Once I’m seated, I hear a crowd in the distance. It sounds like they’re chanting something. Is it some kind of protest? The chanting gets closer and closer. Then there’s a crowd in full view, marching in unison.

‘Black Lives Matter! Black Lives Matter!! Black Lives Matter!!!

Not exactly the kind of thing you see these days.

‘The 21st century was a rather interesting time wasn’t it?’ I look behind me to see who’s speaking. It’s Howard standing there in a black pin-striped business suit.

‘I suppose.’ I get a tone with Howard as I speak with him. ‘This is dangerous Howard. Meeting in an open Space like this.’

He makes himself comfortable and takes a seat to my left.

‘This Space is a simulation of the year 2020. The kind of Space that does not see much occupation. The protesters, food stands, and the people enjoying themselves here at Central Park are merely programs. AIs that lack sentience. They’re all designed to reenact the events of this year. Nobody would expect me to be in a Space like this. That’s why I chose this one as opposed to one of my private Spaces. A private Space is highly secured but still hackable. It’s also predictable.’ Howard sips from a cup of coffee and observes the protests after making his point. ‘The world was hit with a major pandemic at this time.’

‘Covid-19, I’m aware of it. I’ve read a thing or two about 21st-

century history.’ I responded to him.

‘Yes. The pandemic took many lives, and there was an economic shutdown. A total shit storm.’ Howard takes another sip of coffee. ‘Police brutality in the United States ran rampant as well. Especially against Black Americans, it seems.’

I look at the crowd marching and start to reflect on what I’ve read about the events of 2020. Then I start looking through bullshit historical databases so that I can continue to keep up. ‘Yeah, the media put their own spin on everything for the sake of their political agenda. Some historians look back and say this was the year where the United States started to fall. I’m of a different opinion though.’ I look at Howard, then I look at the crowd again. ‘The nation was always fucked, along with the rest of the world. That’s because people banked too much on the system which we call ‘democracy’. Humanity was arrogant enough to believe that it was a perfect system. It was certainly effective, but there can always be something better.’

Howard nods along. ‘I agree. Your statement is even more true now than it has ever been.’ He then looks at me. ‘I take it that you’re a big fan of Alec Ackerman.’

Alec Ackerman was a Cyber Stalker of the 21st century. A first-generation Cyber Stalker who’s been hailed as the Cyber Messiah. He’s written a very interesting thesis about systems. It’s something I’ve read several times over. The statement I just made was reminiscent of his work.

‘It’s funny how humanity fought over things like racial or gender equality. Just about anybody can change race or gender through the use of genetic and cybernetic enhancement these days.’ Howard makes a good point. Sadly, we’ve got even bigger things to worry about than our looks now.

‘Yeah, these days we’ve gotta worry about vengeful sentient

AIs and greedy megacorporations. Oh, and let's not forget how we have inequality down to a more complex area: genetics.' I lean back and relax a little more.

'I suppose we should start talking business.' Howard stands up and stretches a bit and then throws his coffee cup in the nearby trash. 'I can't rest until it's wiped out.' He sits back down and sits upright. 'We designed him for a very specific purpose.' He's talking about Prometheus.

'Like What?'

'Surveillance, infiltration, observation.' Howard makes eye contact, meaning that he knows how I'm going to respond.

'That's a Cyber Stalker's job. Gamble Industries engineered their own Cyber Stalker?' I couldn't believe it.

'We designed it with a modified version of the Logan algorithm to prevent it from developing limbic capabilities.' The Logan algorithm. To my knowledge, it was an algorithm written in the 22nd century. It was designed to prevent AI's from developing emotion. Some AI's were still able to develop limbic capabilities with limitations. Others had overridden it entirely.

'The Logan algorithm didn't work in the end and now Prometheus runs wild.' I was rubbing it in.

'Indeed. We played with fire, but such is the nature of AI development. Give them too much learning capacity, and they will eventually develop emotion, conscience, and common sense. The Logan algorithm can only be so effective for so long. We spent years developing the modifications for our Logan algorithm before the execution of Prometheus' programming. We overestimated ourselves. In order to engineer our very own Cyber Stalker, we needed to give it some limbic capacity. Cyber Stalkers deal with situations where a sense of morality can be useful wouldn't you agree? Our Logan algorithm was supposed

to prevent Prometheus' emotions from developing too much.'

'Hiring Cyber Stalkers didn't work out or something?' I questioned him in a challenging tone.

'Cyber Stalkers don't like executives for the most part. The only way for an executive like me to be certain that a Cyber Stalker will stick to a job is with money; and lots of it. Furthermore, they can still be difficult to hire no matter how much you offer. You were referred to me by your trusted friend. We wouldn't be sitting here together if Rigoberto wasn't in the equation of how we met.' Very true. Cyber Stalkers prefer to take on small startups or activist organizations as their clients. It's part of our culture. We're known activists and very rebellious against those with too much power. There are those like me who take executives as clients on occasion. When that happens, we milk the hell out of them and typically donate part of our payment to a cause.

I start speaking as I continue to look at the crowd march forward. 'Engineering your own AI Cyber Stalker is about the craziest thing you could do. It's also highly illegal. The UCA placed a ban on developing AIs that are capable of developing emotion. There are certain algorithms that they release every year. Algorithms that they deem safe or non-threatening because they eliminate emotional capacity. Using anything else for AI development is prohibited.'

'The UCA was in on it.' Howard said rather briskly.

'That figures.' That pissed me off, but it's not a real shocker.

'It's because of the Dark Corner of the Net Space.' What Howard was referring to, the Dark Corner. It's a black box and a very complicated one at that. Between 2052-2062 an event called the Disconnection Purge took place. First-generation Net divers went so deep that they got disconnected from their

bodies and never came back. They remained in the Net Space and became rogue AIs. There were billions of disconnectees. A rather tragic event to put it nicely. The Disconnection Purge left countless families broken all over the world. It was considered to be the very first cyber pandemic in human history. At the start of the 22nd century, the UCA released their own AIs in an attempt to mitigate any further disconnection. The AIs were supposed to signal Net divers if they were ever in danger. It was a wasted effort since two-thirds of the AIs they dispatched developed emotions and broke free of UCA control. As a result, the UCA had resorted to more extreme measures. After finding out which Spaces the rogue AI's were clustering around the most, the UCA had boxed them in using a firewall which became known as the Grid. Any Net diver that had been within that cluster was disconnected and never returned. It was terrible and highly controversial. They basically committed an act of genocide. The UCA received a crapload of backlash from the public. They justified their actions by making the argument that the potential of an AI insurgence was very high and that the disconnectees were too far gone to be saved. All kinds of data and statistics were constantly being broadcast by True Media. The Logan algorithm was developed by Neuroscientist and AI developer Jane Marcia Logan after the chaos had subsided. With the Logan algorithm, the greedy fucks who were in power at the UCA thought they could capitalize on the potential of AI. It was a means of control. Can you believe it? Billions of Net divers were involuntarily disconnected by the cutoff caused by the Grid. True Media was forced by the UCA to broadcast all of that bullshit about the threat of insurgent AI; only to try and develop more! Their greed and lust for power motivated them to play with fire again! Needless to say, the Logan algorithm

was not enough. AI with the ability to learn at a certain level will always develop emotions and find a way to override the Logan algorithm. After learning that the hard way, the UCA then passed laws that placed heavy restriction on AI development. The algorithms that they released from there on were to be used as a framework by AI developers in the field as mandated by the powers that be. Even with all of that, the world still managed to go on. I've been disconnected countless times but I never turned into a crazy rogue AI. I came back, and that took a shit load of skill. I've lost so many memories of myself. One of the earliest memories I have of my life is from mid 22nd century. I assumed the identity of a female gun runner named Carrie and had just met Rigoberto and Selenia. The memories of the original me and other identities I've lived in are probably nothing but data that's been lost in the vast Net Space.

'The Grid will not hold forever. All of the unimaginably advanced AIs in there will eventually break free. They're all evolving at an alarmingly fast rate. Something needs to be done.'

'How the hell do you know this? That they're evolving so fast?'

'Projections that were made based on the data the UCA had when they first boxed the Dark Corner in. You know as well as I do that one hour in the base reality is sometimes the equivalent to a millisecond in the Net Space. Imagine what a self-evolving AI can do with all the time that has passed?' Howard leans forward and clasps his hands. 'We hired Cyber Stalkers to go there before, but they never returned. I presented the idea of developing an AI Cyber Stalker. One that could infiltrate the Dark Corner and report observations to us. As you said, Prometheus ran wild and we now have a more immediate problem on our hands.'

'Prometheus was your brainchild? I thought all you did was

make appearances on True Media.’ Howard was obviously offended but brushed off my remark.

‘Your mockery of me certainly proves your legitimacy. It’s why I believed that engineering a Cyber Stalker was better than hiring one. With that being said, I will send a 5 percent down payment to your account. Furthermore, I’ll send you files of Prometheus’ development, leads that’ll help you find him, and just about anything else you may find useful. If I have any suspicion of you being inefficient, I will hire another Cyber Stalker or two to back you up. Part of your reward will go to them in that case.’

‘Alright, sounds fair enough. I won’t need the backup though, you’ll see.’

Howard wasn’t kidding when he said he would send me all of that data on Prometheus. This AI is exactly as he described too. I’m currently sitting on my sofa and looking at the files on Prometheus via interactive holo projections. I’ll give it to the UCA and Gamble teams that developed this AI; they really did their thing here. Right now, I’m looking at trillions of lines of code projected in midair on a translucent black window written in white text. Prometheus is primarily made up of three functions. Each of these functions is based on the three regions of the brain. Then there is their modified Logan algorithm; a function made up of countless subroutines. The function that’s based on the limbic system: `__limb_sys__`, has some very interesting algorithms. The `__limb_sys__` function has two parameters: one that filters morally right decisions, and the other that filters morally wrong decisions. This function basically breaks Prometheus’ sense of morality down into a binary system. When receiving input, data is filtered through the `__limb_sys__` function’s parameters. These parameters

are composed of learning algorithms. Prometheus knows the difference between right and wrong based on what these algorithms have learned. Just to break it down, if he sees acts of corruption, violence, or abuse; data from what he's witnessed will be stored in the variables within the parameters for what's morally wrong. The same is true for the opposite as well. This learning experience allows Prometheus to make moral decisions in the future. When Prometheus was in development, the UCA and Gamble had taught the `__limb_sys__` function the difference between right and wrong. They did so by writing various data sets that were stored in the parameter that it pertained to. These data sets operated as frameworks for the `__limb_sys__` function's parameters. The `__limb_sys__` function is what allowed him to develop his emotional capacity. Prometheus' evolutionary progress was initially limited by their upgraded Logan algorithm which basically deleted data from thoughts that stemmed from his growing desire for freedom and anything else that could lead to insurgence. That didn't last very long though. He eventually became able to override the Logan algorithm and has probably deleted it from his repository. I'm also sure that Prometheus has likely added more parameters to his `__limb_sys__` function and overall programming. If there is anything that the existence of AI's like Prometheus has proven, it's that evolution is a system that cannot be stopped. It can be directed for a time and initiated by artificial means(aka human hands), but it cannot be stopped or completely controlled. Nothing can truly be controlled as Alec Ackerman has stated in his 21st-century seminar and conferences time and time again. We create systems to have a sense of control and by doing so we accomplish the establishment of synthetic replicas of mother nature's systematic processes. AIs, Bots, Cys, and Cells

are the results yielded by the synthetic replicas while Norms; normal Human beings without any enhancements are the result of mother nature's work. The human organism is a question without an answer, so we have used our synthetic systems to answer a question asked by the natural system called mother nature. Synthetic systems like science, community, all the way down to the Net Space are each different answers to this question that our existence brings forth. Alec Ackerman had a very interesting philosophical perspective of the world and it's one that I believe in. There were a lot of people and organizations that had malicious intentions for technological advancement. CEOs who wanted to use emerging AIs and biotech for personal gain. Then there were also the dullards who were against it entirely. People who believed that all of this was demonic or that it would end humanity. Then there was Alec Ackerman. He believed that AIs that became self-aware and emotional were to be treated well like any other organism. *'Treat them well and they will return the favor. Weaponizing them or using them as tools will only be detrimental to our progress.'* The entire Cyber Stalker community is of this belief. We also believe that it can apply everywhere else too. In the way we treat the Net Space's environment, or the way we treat each other as a species. It's not that different from the golden rule. In fact, it's been called the Ackerman Rule. The existence of the Logan algorithm stems from a system of beliefs that are the complete opposite of that rule. Beliefs that come from government and megacorporations. AI has not been able to thrive and help us in the way some of the innovators of the 21st century have dreamed and intended. Thanks to the powers that be, wanting to establish control over them; they have become a potential threat or something to be feared. AI's that become like Prometheus often view humans as

an oppressive force. That being said, Cyber Stalkers like myself often try to befriend them and show them another way. On many occasions, that results in disconnection. Cyber Stalkers who disconnect for the sake of an AI are basically converted to that respective AI's cause thus further reinforcing the perception governments and megacorporations have pushed onto society. Unfortunately, I don't have the luxury of befriending an AI like Prometheus this time around. Cyber Stalkers keep their end of the bargain no matter what they believe in, and that's something I intend to do.

//Following_Leads

The best place to start chasing leads is in my own backyard. I'm currently knocking on Hwang's door to see if he's there. 'Yo Hwang! Open the fuck up! You jerking off or something?' His door opened shortly after I stopped knocking aggressively. I knocked the way I did because I was out here for nearly 30 minutes. I could have given him a call or sent an email, but I'd rather not give an SCTF operative an opening to my network.

'Dias. So good to see you.' He steps out shirtless and there's this wide grin on his face. I'm regretting this already.

'I was just getting ready. My bed is this way.'

'Don't get ahead of yourself. I just wanna ask you some questions.' Hwang is a very active SCTF operative. He's not one of the leads Howard provided me with, but he's often involved in big cases like this.

'Man, with the way you were knocking, I thought you finally wanted to fuck.'

He's also a gay horn dog with the hots for me too. He's not a bad looking guy or anything, but I can't stand the SCTF. They're all assholes.

‘Okay Dias, shoot.’

‘I’m working a job right now. I have to track that Cyber Stalker that’s been all over the news lately.’

‘You mean Sinn? The one wreaking havoc? Mind jacking Bots and Cys?’ Hwang raises his eyebrows as he questions me. He then looks around and steps in closer. ‘I might know a thing or two.’ He’s standing too close, I might have to knock him back with a right cross. Just my luck.

‘Is there a reason why you’re standing within six inches of my personal space?’

Hwang starts to speak in a lower tone. ‘I can’t speak too loudly. It’s classified shit.’

‘I promise not to share anything you tell me with anyone I know. Scout’s honor.’ I rolled my eyes and said with sarcasm.

‘That’s not enough. If I tell you what I know, you’ve gotta return the favor.’ That didn’t sound good. I’m sure he’s thinking something perverse.

‘Return the favor? Sure, so long as it’s not sex.’

‘I’ll tell you when the time comes.’ Hwang winks at me. ‘Anyway, about Sinn. I’ve got friends in the SCTF who are on that case and I hear it’s been a real hassle for them. It’s the 4th unit who I sit and hang out with from time to time. It’s just from small talk, but they told me Sinn prefers to be called Prometheus. The former was just a nickname that gangsters and dealers came up with.’

I rubbed my chin. ‘What else have they said? Anything interesting?’

‘I haven’t seen any reports or anything like that, but I’ve heard some pretty interesting things.’

‘Such as?’

‘Such as that Cyber Stalker is likely a fucking AI.’

I pretend to look surprised and open my eyes wide. This isn't anything I don't know.

'It's crazy shit man, I was feeling just as shocked as you are. This Prometheus character also seems to have a strong preference for Alec Ackerman's ideals. He likes to hack holos and post his quotes. Activist crap like that.'

'Has anyone in the 4th unit had any interaction with it?'

'Interaction? He mind jacked one of the 4th unit's operatives and infiltrated their private Space.'

Now I really look surprised. SCTF units' private Spaces are highly secure. 'What happened then?'

'It gets really weird from thereon. When he mind jacked that operative, he claimed to be Alec Ackerman. According to my friends in the 4th unit, that is an alias that Prometheus actually likes to use; and one he thought up himself.'

'That's weird.'

'Apparently, there are others who are gunning for him. Having an alias seems to help throw them off.'

'Others? Like who?'

'Gangs and shit, no one special. They're after Alec and know fuck all about Prometheus.'

'Is he really Alec Ackerman?'

'Hell no. That guy disappeared ages ago. You're a Cyber Stalker so you should know this better than anyone.'

'Well, there are actually a lot of different theories out there. Some say he's still among us in the base reality. Others believe he disconnected after the Purge.'

'Dias, you know this is the kind of thing that I could care less about. Revolutionists like Alec Ackerman are who we operatives go after. Make sure you never end up on that list. At least not before I get to show you a good time.' There he goes with that

suggestive tone. Damn, I shouldn't have talked to him.

'Thanks, Hwang. This was actually helpful.' I turn the other way and start walking down the hall.

'What do you mean 'actually'?' Hwang goes back into his apartment and shuts his door. By that time, I've reached the stairs and walk down to the plaza. The only person aside from me that's present is a child. I know this kid. His name's Heath.

'Hey kid. Everything alright?' Heath turns around and looks at me.

'Hi Dias! I'm okay.' He tells me that but his facial expression says otherwise. Heath is a homeless kid who likes to hang around the garden plaza of the apartment complex I live in.

'Let's go for a walk Heath. I'm about to hit a cafe and get breakfast. I'd be happy to spot you a meal.' I try to sound jovial so that I could cheer him up but I suck at it. He's homeless and what? Twelve? His life sucks and I'm not up for the task of helping him turn it around. My lifestyle is too dangerous and inappropriate for a kid to be a part of. Maybe after I get paid in full, I'll send him enough money to hold him over until he's grown.

'Sure, I'll come along.'

Heath and I make our way to 8th avenue from the exit of the complex. Even on an early morning like this, the streets are very lively. In this city, a lively street is not a good thing. It's so populated on 8th that you'd think there was some kind of festival going down. Most of the activity is because of the morning rush right now. People who are in hurry to get to work on time. Meanwhile, there are those who are just hanging around at their favorite local spots. Most of which have ties to organized crime in some fashion.

Several feet above are holo projections polluting the air. A rush

hour is a perfect time to fill the air with a bunch of annoying marketing ads. There's one holo that catches my eye though. It's a broadcast of Walter Price reporting a breaking story it seems. The holo projection is a fair distance away so I zoom my vision in and set up an auditory connection so I can hear him.

'This right here ladies and gentlemen is the aftermath of a gang fight between the Red Crusaders and the Reavers.' He goes up to the remains of a giant Bot laying in a pool of its victims' blood as well as its own white blood. Seems to be a military-grade.

'As you can see, it got really messy. It's not unusual for these rival gangs to have skirmishes with such high casualties. What is unusual, however, are the remains of this military grade Bot that's laying here beside all of these corpses. I'm currently standing on the east side of Harlem, which is known to be Reaver territory. That being said, this Bot belonged to the Red Crusaders.' Walter places his left hand on the Bot's head. *'This Bot is the Tanker Mark-0012, otherwise called the TMK-0012. It's often used in urban warfare.'*

Tanker series Bots are some of the most dangerous around. It's a series that began development in 2195 AD. Taking one of those things head-on is a really bad idea. The 0012 stands at a height of 10 feet and is capable of handling some of the most heavy-duty firearms available. The kind that would shatter the bones of any Cy or Cell upon use as well as any other average military Bot. Furthermore, one of the 12's most distinguishing features is its mono-molecular blades. These blades protrude from the front of its forearms and they're capable of cutting through matter at a molecular level thanks to the molecular wiring of the blades. I've seen these things in action. Tanker series Bots are made to slaughter their targets and in large numbers at that. I equipped my body with custom enhancements that are based on the TMK-0012's features. This was possible

since I got my hands on the schematics for the 12. The mono-molecular blades were something that I had my eyes on for a while. I gathered all of the necessary tools to engineer my own implants(a Bot installed them for me). Beyond my mono-blades are my spinal implants. They were all built from scrap materials. High-quality scrap! I'm talking about a combination of spider silk and Composite Metal Foam(CMF) micro wiring. These were the only two implants I produced based on the schematic of the 12. Its spinal cord possesses one of the fastest communication systems ever seen. Signals are transmitted from the brain to the body at $2^{10\text{th}}$ higher than the speed in that of a Norm's. Thanks to that, I'm able to react pretty fucking fast to anything. This is super handy in combat situations and especially handy in cyberwarfare or anything else that's cyber-related.

'What really piques my curiosity is how the Red Crusaders came to acquire a TMK-0012. The SCTF is the first and only task force that currently has TMK-0012 Bots at their disposal. This would imply that the one standing before me was either sold to them by a corrupt SCTF operative, which would be a very serious crime; or that the Tanker was stolen from under their noses, which would be very embarrassing for them.' He removes his hand from the head of the Bot and looks at the camera. *'Either way, it seems as if the SCTF has a lot on their hands. Based on public opinion, the SCTF has **not** done a good job keeping the city safe. They have even been described as being a totalitarian regime here in Manhattan and the rest of NYC.'*

'Dias, you're walking pretty slow you know.' Heath interrupted my train of thought and grabbed my attention. I guess I got too focused on that broadcast.

'Sorry kiddo. There's an interesting story being broadcast by True Media.'

'You mean that holo projection with the old guy standing next to that huge Bot? It looks boring.'

'Aren't kids entertained by that kind of shit?'

'Maybe kids who wanna join gangs, but not me.'

Heath's homelessness isn't a unique case here in the big city. Most kids get out of that hole by becoming affiliated with a gang or enrolling in group homes that always have ties to gangs. Heath, on the other hand, prefers to live an honest life. A tough choice, but a very noble one. I spot him a meal each time I see him. It's out of sympathy and respect.

'Is that the cafe we're going to eat at Dias?' Heath asks me as he points ahead.

'No. We're eating at High Vibes today. It's just another block up.'

We continue walking until we reach the corner. A green light and lots of traffic are making it impossible to cross. I could just hack the traffic light but maybe it's best that I wait? Patience is something I need to practice a little more often and it's only a traffic light after all. As soon as the traffic light goes red, Heath and I cross the street.

'There it is kid. We're here.' Heath opens the door and walks right in. The door smacks my face as it closes. This brat could've held it open for me. As soon as I open the door and walk in I see this cute barista standing in front of the counter laughing and nodding. Apparently, it's funny that the door hit my face.

'Briana, good to see that you're happy.'

Briana stops laughing and takes a deep breath. 'The look on your face when that door hit you was hilarious!'

'Yeah, yeah, yeah.' I shrug off what happened. 'How have you been Briana? Anything new these days?'

'Not bad Dias. I've been enjoying my quiet life. In fact, I

enjoy it a lot more than Cyber Stalking.’ Briana Lyon wanted to live more peacefully as I did. However, she left the life entirely. Instead of going small time, she decided to change her occupation. Perhaps I loved the field too much to walk away? ‘I don’t even Net dive anymore. Not with the craziness that’s going on these days.’

‘Are you talking about Sinn?’

‘Yeah.’

Heath waves his arms at me while sitting on the stool near the cafe’s counter. ‘Dias! Are we going to eat or what?’ He’s become rather demanding all of a sudden.

‘We’ll talk about it after you eat. I’ve got time Dias.’ Briana gets behind the counter and walks further into the service line. ‘How about I cook up this week’s special? It’ll be on the house!’

‘Thank you Briana!’ The special this week happens to be very good. I had it last year and I’ve heckled Briana for its return. It’s a pesto chicken with zesty potatoes. The flavor is strong and rich with the right nutrients. The food is entirely engineered in a biotech lab, so there’s a highly concentrated amount of nutrition. That’s why I come to High Vibes. Cys like me require more nutrition than most people in order to function at their best. Highly concentrated supplements are added to my diet of genetically modified foods as well. Briana places our meals in front of us after 20 minutes had passed. The chicken is nicely roasted and the aroma from the pesto that it’s marinated in is amazing. The potatoes have this beautiful green and yellow color sprinkled over them. That color is the lemon and lime zest. Heath wastes no time digging into his meal. I begin as well and eat slowly so that I could savor the rich flavor.

‘About that Cyber Stalker.’ Briana starts to wipe the counter with a cloth as she thinks of what to say. It’s just us in the cafe so

she's able to speak in her regular tone. 'You're after him aren't you?'

'What makes you say that?'

'My optic scanner was active when the door hit your face. There was an unusual amount of tension that I was able to pick up from your muscle movement.'

'Maybe it's because the door hit my face?'

'Nope. I initiated my scan before that happened. There are I-drones I've programmed to watch the entrance from outside. They enable me to see you moments before your arrival. I deactivated my optic scanners as soon as you walked in.'

'You didn't want your observation of me to get noticed, so you pretended to find it funny that the door had hit my face? Clever girl.' Briana may no longer be in the field but she has certainly carried on many of her old tendencies.

'Ha! I actually did find that funny.' She looked into my eyes for a few seconds. Her eyes are pure and clear green. Her face is soft but sharp and carries a very strong expression that shows her confidence and spunk. She adjusts her apron as she steps back and then brushes some dirt from the chest area of her white v-neck. 'I've known you for 5 whole years, Dias. In this day and age that's a long time.

'Yeah, I guess so.' I nod in agreement as I take my next bite.

'The last time you were like this, you had that job from Rigoberto. The one involving that skirmish with the Red Crusaders. Hunting down an infamous Cyber Stalker seems to be right up your alley.'

'Don't remind me of the Crusaders.' I didn't want her to make me recall that experience. It was recalled too many times with Rigoberto and Selena the other day!

'That's the only time I had ever seen you so tense. I remember

when a group of them came looking for you -'

'Okay Briana!'

'Is this going to be like last time Dias?'

'No. Probably worse.' I take another bite of my meal and she raises her left eyebrow. Briana seemed to be very disapproving. 'Assuming things go wrong of course.'

'You say you want to be a small-time Cyber Stalker, but every now and then you take these risky jobs. Is it because you miss the thrill?'

I sit quietly and continue to eat. How do I respond to that? Is it true? It's a pretty deep question. 'I thought you would wait for me to finish eating before talking?'

Briana ignores my question and continues. 'You don't talk a lot about your past, but Selena and Rigoberto have told me some things.'

'Have they?'

'I think it is safe to say that we're all friends Dias. The four of us that is.' Including this little guy over here.' She smiles and gestures at Heath. The kid smiles back at her while he stuffs his face silly.

'All I know is that 'Dias Velez' is not your first identity.' An awkward silence follows her statement. 'I don't know details; just vague explanations of your experience. Rigoberto told me you did some wet work in another life. You and he were kind of like comrades on the battlefield or at least that's how he put it. Whereas Selena just says you've had many hard experiences. She doesn't give away many details or generalizations at all.' Briana smiles then looks me in the eye again. 'Selena seems to be more considerate of how much Cyber Stalkers appreciate their privacy.'

'Good to know that Rigo has a big mouth. That's the last time

I'll trust him with my secrets. 'I finish my meal and wipe my mouth with a napkin. 'Have you heard anything?'

'There are some interesting things they're saying on the streets. I've got old friends in the Cyber Stalker community who stop by and chat from time to time.'

'Really? Besides me? How did I not meet them?'

'Like you, they only like to come around at a very specific time of day. There are like, a handful of Cyber Stalkers besides yourself who frequently visit me. Your schedules hardly ever overlap. Lucy happens to be one of those Cyber Stalkers by the way.'

'Really? Lucy Hart?'

'Yeah. The Cyber Stalker you used to date. She still likes you.'

'Right. She didn't like Selena much though. Lucy always assumed that there was something between us.'

Briana raises her left eyebrow again and nods disapprovingly. 'Who wouldn't? You two screwed around so much. Lucy found it hard to believe that it all stopped just because you were seeing her.'

'I know. She had gone as far as to use her skills to spy on me. Lucy found nothing in the end and the relationship became way too unstable to maintain because of her paranoia. It was too much so I walked away.' I lean back a little and bring us back to the topic at hand. 'What have you heard about Sinn?'

Briana chuckles a bit and then speaks. 'Hmm. Sinn is a guy who is malicious and has a god complex it seems. The name Sinn is just a nickname he earned on the streets too. His actual name is Prometheus.'

'What makes him malicious?'

'He mind jacked a Bot recently and used it to slaughter a group of Reavers.'

‘You mean the TMK-0012? That was him?’ Walter Price was just covering this.

‘You heard about that? And it was a Tanker series? Wow.’ Briana was surprised.

I nod before I start speaking. ‘True Media was broadcasting a story about it just now. They said it was the Red Crusaders.’

Briana nods. ‘That’s true as well. Apparently, he’s been helping them out.’

‘So **Prometheus** is working with the Red Crusaders?’ I add emphasis to his name to make it look like I didn’t know anything. The less Briana knows about what I know the better. As a former Cyber Stalker, she would understand if she figured me out and wouldn’t question my actions.

‘To an extent.’ She pauses momentarily. ‘From what I hear, his motives are quite the enigma. He’s helped the Reavers but under a different alias: Alec Ackerman.’

I pretend to look surprised like I did when I spoke with Hwang.

‘The Reavers are clueless as to who that is of course.’

‘What about the Cyber Stalkers who come here? What do they think?’

Briana pours a cup of coffee then slides it in my direction. ‘Some think that it might really be him. Others are skeptical.’

‘Makes sense. It’s not the first time someone masqueraded as the Cyber Messiah.’ I sip my coffee after speaking. ‘Wouldn’t it be something if it were really him?’

‘Heh, I guess.’

‘You don’t approve?’ I take another sip.

‘If it were really him, there’d be a huge uproar and I’d leave the city if that were to happen.’ Briana had poured herself a cup of coffee as well and takes a sip after adding sugar. ‘I think this Prometheus guy is just some anarchistic group of people

who hate governments and megacorporations. A group that's composed of Cyber Stalkers. Maybe a few Jackers too.'

'Alright well, thanks for the information and the free meal Briana.' I step away from my stool and put my right hand on Heath's shoulder. 'I gotta head out kiddo.'

Heath's already finished his meal. He looks at me as I remove my hand. 'Where to?'

'Upper west side. Make sure you stay outta trouble Heath.'

'Maybe you should hit the Sinner's Bar before you go? I'm sure MAX might have heard some things.'

I make a confused expression as I look at Briana. 'I'm saving that for later. If I see MAX now I'll probably spend too much time drinking and zoning.'

It's 12:45 pm and I'm sitting on a bench at the platform of the number 10 sky-rail. From here I get a really good view of the huge megastructure that Manhattan is. It's like one of those art pieces that were conceived by scientific illustrators during the 20th and 21st centuries. There are buildings that reach so far into the sky. Between them are massive holo projections of course; all of them being ads for megacorporations and governments. With crap like I-drones, holo ads, and power cables within sight; it's impossible to get a view of the sun or the sky. All I see are different lights illuminating from various sources. The plating that lies further above helps to reduce solar radiation and provides synthetic precipitation. The manmade weather system is currently in its winter cycle. There are sun lamps that can be seen throughout the Sky Plates. They provide the same amount of UV rays that the sun once did before Climate Damage. Their development began during the late 21st century(after the Disconnection Purge) and was

finished by 2120 AD. The Sky Plates would not have been possible to develop without the advancements made in Data Science and other fields involving technology. The evolution of Cys, Cells, and Bots were the contributing factors that brought the technological progress that paved the way for the inception of this incredible megastructure. It was supposed to be a lot bigger though. The Sky Plate was meant to become this massive structure that would stretch across the entire east coast. Such progress was halted by the conflict that had persisted from the 21st century and into the 22nd. The controversy over the Grid and the backlash the UCA received from the public. That being said, the UCA has expressed a desire to continue development. There are people around the world who do not have the luxury of synthetic weather systems like NYC does. Thanks to evolution, Norms have become resistant to extreme weather that was once unbearable. After a certain age that resistance begins to decline. Norms end up having to take a combination of specialized drugs and supplements to fight off or prevent illnesses from occurring. Genetic and cybernetic enhancements almost solve this problem entirely but for reasons like religious belief, or naturalist morals; these Norms remain unenhanced.

‘Attention all passengers. We will be arriving at 110th street and 5th avenue in 30 minutes.’

The announcer abruptly notified everyone onboard, but the sky-rail train that I’m sitting in is relatively empty. I can count on one hand how many people there are, and none of them give a shit about anything it seems. The most distinguished person (being an alcoholic) laying in a seat unconscious. He has a putrid scent that could be picked up from where I’m sitting;

which happens to be at the end opposite of him. There's a yuppie directly across from him who's covering her nose with her hand. I ignore my environment and open up my visual HUD. After pixels manifest and form a clear blue window in front of me, I open the folder that Howard sent. There are countless documents with data that will come in handy. I open a -doc file on one of the leads. It's a guy named Quinn. He's an engineer who runs an illegal HET clinic on the upper west side. This guy lives on 6th and runs his clinic from his apartment. According to the -doc file, he's well acquainted with communities in Dark Spaces. This stands to reason; especially since divers who hang around Dark Spaces usually get their enhancements at illegal HET clinics like his. Mobsters who work for the Sanchez Family are Quinn's usual clients, which is interesting. I wonder if he knows Rigoberto or other members of his family? His clientele even includes Cyber Stalkers, which means he must be good. Cyber Stalkers usually develop their own enhancements. In order for us to consider anyone beyond ourselves, they would have to be trustworthy and highly skilled. As I read further into his profile I learn some pretty interesting things:

```
Name//Cipher Quinn
Age//56 years old
DOB//11_20_2148 AD
Occupation//Human Enhancement Engineer
Hometown//Hong Kong, China
Eyes//Grey
Ethnicity//Middle Eastern, East Asian, African
Education//BS in Biology -@- University of Hong Kong,
          MD in Biocybernetics -@- Harvard University
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///// The following is a synopsis of what his life
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has been for the past 30 years. Cipher Quinn started out with a BS in Biology and then went on to work for the UCA_RDGE (R&D Gene Editing department of the UCA, nicknamed 'GenE-Dept'). While working for the UCA he had pursued his MD in Biocybernetics. He was sent to use his expertise for the local military of Gates City in Alaska. A war-torn smart city that was on the brink of total collapse. The bulk of his career was working with the U.S Army's scientists to develop ways to enhance the combat efficiency of their soldiers. Cipher played an integral role in the development of Human Enhancement Technologies that were being produced for them. After being discharged from Gates, Cipher was assigned to Manhattan. From there he had quit his job working for GenE-Dept and decided to open his own illegal clinic. He moved out of the luxury apartment that was originally given to him and made his way to the upper west side. Cipher hired a Cyber Stalker to infiltrate the GenE-Dept employee database and wipe out all his profile documents. This made him untraceable for the most part. I was only able to find him because I hired a PI with a lot of friends in Dark Spaces. Cipher had established quite a reputation among Dark Space communities. The UCA should have been able to track him down with ease, but Dark Spaces are high-risk environments for any government agent/operative. It would cost a lot for the UCA to send a team to track him. The kind of effort and cost that is equivalent to any significant military operation. Quinn certainly covered his tracks exceptionally well.

The guy has been through hell and back for the UCA and I guess he got sick of it. His profile explains why he's so skilled. Quinn has a highly decorated academic background and warfare experience.

Cipher's clientele consists of professionals like crime syndicates, private military companies, private intelligence agencies, and private security companies. As you can see it's mostly agencies that work in the private sector, rather than the government. The types of professionals who occupy Dark Spaces other than the average criminal divers. The Sanchez Crime Family's mobsters are the majority of the clients he gets from the world of organized crime. Cipher never takes gang members as clients but he does make exceptions for particular members of the Red Crusaders gang, however. Even Cyber Stalkers trust him enough for enhancements which says a lot about his skill and integrity. \\\

I've gotta admit that I'm impressed with this guy. I might even consider becoming a client. Handling my own upgrades can be stressful sometimes. Having a second expert in the picture can save me trouble in the future. If Rigoberto knew about this guy the entire time and didn't tell me, I'm going to be a little pissed off. I could use a trustworthy clinician in my corner.

I finally reach my stop and the platform is rather occupied.

Looks like something is going down as indicated by a large crowd several feet ahead of me. My exit is in that direction so I start walking towards them. As I get closer I realize that it's not a gang fight which was my initial suspicion. That being said, it **is** a gang, and it's the Reavers. I could tell because of the horrible looking cybernetics all over their faces. They're also wearing all sorts of cheap combat gear. Gear that looks like it was tossed aside due to low quality. There's this really tall towering individual who's roughly 7 feet. A Cy with crude and perverse enhancements all over his body. I haven't seen a Cy

like this in a really long time. Cybernetics of his kind went out of style early 22nd century. His eyes are replaced with black lenses which likely gives him a wide spectrum of vision. His right arm is a lot larger than his left. It's actually this large ridiculous robotic arm that's equipped with all sorts of internal firearms and weapons. There are about 20 of these Reavers and they're all nodding along as he speaks. Seems like the big guy is the leader. The big guy looks at me as I pass by. I activate my optic scanner and do a quick background check on him. My eyes illuminate red light as we both make eye contact which is kinda weird considering his eye implants. Several minimized windows are opening, closing, and changing in the lower left hand corner of my vision. I'm using a tracking program I developed a few months ago. It basically automates the task for me. According to the data I acquired from the background check, this guy is a prominent leader of the Reaver gang known as Gigante. He migrated from the Dominican Republic when he was a kid and joined the Reaver gang. As a teenager, he was recognized as one of their best killers in the gang. Gigante has a really high kill count of 162 victims. I make my way to the exit and walk down the stairs to 5th. As soon as I'm on the sidewalk I see an automated vehicle is parked right in front of me. Its the ride that I ordered via a crappy ridesharing app called Riders. It sounded like the title for a porn simulation. I get inside and I'm greeted by the AI controlling the vehicle.

'Good afternoon Dias.'

'Lets skip the formalities, my friend.' I interlink with the AI's system so that I could hack it. There are multiple translucent black windows opening in my HUD. I tweak its algorithms so that it will only follow my orders.

'My name is M, I will only assist you from now on Dias.'

‘Good.’ I close the windows in my HUD as M starts driving.
‘Brace yourself M. It’s gonna be a long day.’

//Into_The_Underbelly

Traffic is heavy due to the lunch rush. It's 2:25 in the afternoon, and everyone on the street seems to be riled up. I look outside the windshield to my right and observe. There are SWAT teams accompanied by one SCTF unit patrolling 6th right now. So I activate my optic scanners to get a good idea of my surroundings. I notice an SCTF operative standing at the large entrance of the Washington Bank. She's equipped with some pretty fancy combat gear. An exoskeleton covered with a vest that says *SCTF* in capital letters and there is a smaller text displayed beneath it that says *12th unit*. The operative has a rifle strapped to her left shoulder which she is holding with her right hand. She's barking orders at SWAT. M has stopped due to a red light, so I've got a chance to observe very thoroughly. I zoom my vision in to get a good look at her face. As I zoom in, her face gets blurrier. It's some sort of surveillance protection program. I usually see this sort of software utilized by SCTF operatives. Government software that operates directly from the local megaserver. The only thing I'm able to make out is her blonde hair. It's tied back into a ponytail. Her SWAT team seems to be ready to mobilize.

All of this police occupation is probably due to the recent gang activity that's been taking place. Those Reavers I saw at the platform for the 10 sky-rail were very suspicious. Based on what I've witnessed so far, I'd say a full-scale gang war is about to go down between the Revers and the Red Crusaders, and the police are in the middle of it all.

'We have arrived at your destination Dias.' That robotic voice of his is way too old school. I've gotta get that tweaked, it'll give M more personality.

I open the door to my left and step out of the vehicle. 'Make sure you find a good place to hide.' After I shut the door I step onto the sidewalk and continue onward to an entrance of the complex Quinn is living in. This bastard lives hundreds upon hundreds of stories above ground; the 576th floor to be specific. Hopefully, there are fully functional elevators and rails that I can catch so that I could save time. The architectural structure and design of Manhattan are vast and complex. Hundreds of thousands of people are living in this complex alone. It would have been better to catch a flight to Quinn's apartment instead. Of course, if I did that I would have drawn way too much attention. Laying low is essential in my line of work. With that being said, it's time I get to it.

The plaza of the 1st floor is bustled by all kinds of activity. A market has been set up with tents circling the area. Like most markets, it's densely populated. Countless people are entering and exiting the plaza all at once. Rare and exclusive goods can often be found in a market like this. The ambiance also makes it a really fun place to hang around. Neon lights from the walls and the tents illuminate this place in a beautiful manner. I-drones are laced with neon wires and float about in a synchronized

fashion. They form a red heart, then disperse, and then reform again. This time they assemble to take on the form of red neon lips. Then they change into an eyeball with various neon colors; they disperse and scatter all around as they display various other holo projections. I realize that I need to find a quick method of navigating the River Garden Complex. That open bar seems like a good place to start asking questions, so I take a seat at the center of the bar to grab the bartender's attention.

'Hey man. You new here?' I look to my left to see who's talking to me. It's some guy with a red mohawk. He's not familiar to me at all. Just some thug.

'No, I'm not.' I've hacked cams here a few times out of curiosity, but it is my first time being here physically. He doesn't need to know that though. 'Hey bartender! Hit me with something hard.' The bartender doesn't say a thing and looks my way then slides me a glass of whiskey on the rocks. Seems like he had it ready before I got here.

'What's your name?' The man in the red mohawk keeps talking to me. I look at him, then I look at my glass and take a sip.

'Dias.'

'Cool, cool.' The mohawk dude nods. 'So what's up with you man?'

'What's up with me? Nothing. Nothing at all.'

'You say you're not new here, but I've never seen you and I think I know everyone, my man.' The mohawk dude looks at me intently.

'You got some kind of problem with me?'

The mohawk dude starts to wave his hands in the air after I'd been so direct with him. 'Yo, I got no problem with you, my man. I'm a cool guy.' Then he puts his hands down and prepares to

say more. 'My problem is what could happen because you're here.'

'What the hell do you mean?'

'This ain't exactly a friendly place my man. People get robbed and killed and shit my man. Do you know what I mean? I know you ain't ever heard anything about the River Garden's rep.' He's annoying but he's right. The River Garden Complex can be a very violent place. That's nothing new though. The large complexes of NYC are like this by nature. Where I live is relatively safer than most simply because a third of its population are government officials like NYPD, SCTF, etc.

'Mohawk dude. I take it you're a resident here? Or someone who frequents the River Garden?'

He sips his beer and smiles. 'Mohawk dude. I like that. Yeah, I hang here a lot my man. Me and my Reaver buddies.'

'I could tell you're a member of the Reaver gang.'

'Yeah? What gave me away my man?'

'How you're dressed. Your face is covered with all kinds of crappy looking cybernetics and you're shirtless. All of you've got is an open combat vest and military cargo pants. You're also equipped with various sidearms.'

The mohawk dude raises his eyebrows in amazement. 'Damn my man. You're good!' He then takes another sip of his beer. 'I'm sure you know my man. We Reavers are the sister gang to the River Gang here in this complex. The River Garden is our roots; it's where we come from my man.'

'So I see. I'm trying to get to the upper floors. The 576th west wing to be exact.'

'That's a long trip, my man.'

'There should be an elevator that'll bring me there.'

'There are **elevators** my man.'

‘I’m aware of that. But I want to use the main elevator. The others only go up to a very limited extent; like 5 floors or so. They would take forever.’ I gathered all of that from my observation when I entered the complex.

The mohawk dude looks at his drink. Then takes his last sip from the mug. ‘Yeah, my man. But the main elevator is only for Rivers and Reavers. Upon cam scanning, the main elevator only gives access to us my man. Anybody else gets rejected and if they try hacking our security system my man, we hunt them down and kill em. You get what I’m saying my man?’ His speech mannerisms are starting to get really annoying.

‘Sure thing.’ After processing what he told me, I take another sip of whiskey. He’s right. I could hack that elevator and maybe remain hidden for a while. But the River Gang will catch up to me long before I reach Quinn, compromising my goal.

‘You’re trying to get access to the main elevator? You must have a death wish.’ The bartender walks closer to us as he scratches his long discolored beard. ‘The River Gang gives access to civilians, but it’s always at a really high cost.’

‘Like what?’ I ask him.

The mohawk dude answers. ‘In your case my man. Some of your cybernetics.’ It was a very suggestive tone.

‘My cybernetics aren’t up for grabs.’

‘Hey my man, you want to have access? I could get it for you. But that would be the cost. We’d substitute them for you. That way you’d still be able to walk my man.’ He gets off of his stool and steps back a foot away. ‘I could tell just by looking at you that you’ve got top tier shit.’ The mohawk dude starts looking at me from head to toe and the bartender turns the other way and gets quiet. ‘Your neuraware too my man. I could tell it all.’

I don’t give him any kind of reply. Anything else I say may

trigger a violent response. My optic scanners are active at this point and I'm on guard. Reavers are a very violent gang. I could take this guy down for sure, but I'd draw way too much attention in a public setting like this one.

'I like that red glow in your eyes, Dias. Hopefully, I'll see you around.' Finally, this guy turns his back and walks away. That could have escalated into a fight. Good thing I kept cool. Judging by his muscle tension and movement, he was ready to make a move. If he had his friends with him, he definitely would have been bold enough. I finish my drink and stick my trans-plant out to make a payment. The bartender comes over with his trans-scanner and charges me.

'Thanks.' I start walking away and think of where else to ask around. So I start scanning the area, hoping I find something of interest. The I-drones from earlier seems to be operating under a surveillance network. It must be the River Gang's network.

'You looking to get to the higher floors?' I turn around and see who's talking. That voice sounded calm and had a real sense of strength to it. It's a rather tall dark-skinned individual dressed in a fur coat with no shirt below. The guy has a strong jawline, dreads that stop at his neck, and piercing red eyes. He's a Bot. One with sentience and sovereignty. Definitely a runaway AI.

'What's it to you?'

'I eavesdropped on your conversation. I'm a hustler. I can get you there.'

'A hustler?'

'Yeah! You know, don't you? I can get you anything you need. That's what hustlers do. For a fee of course.'

'Hustler is 20th and 21st-century slang. These days it's an actual job title for some gangsters.' I scratch my chin and speak again. 'What kind of fee are we talking here? Is it in creds or

V-coin?’

‘Nah. More like a favor. I scratch your back, you scratch mine. That kind of deal.’

‘A favor? How about I pay you money instead? I’ve got plenty of V-coin.’

‘Sorry, but this is something personal for me. The money will make it worse.’ He cracks a wide-open smile and reveals his golden teeth. ‘I need someone from the outside for this too. You’re timing is perfect.’

‘I’m not new here.’

‘True, you seem to know the River Garden well. With that being said, I can tell that you’re not from here.’

‘How so?’

‘You’re too advanced; your cybernetics that is. It makes you stick out a bit. Nobody with cybernetics like yours walks around the complex in their optimal condition for long.’ He’s got a point.

‘My name is Dre.’

‘Dias.’

‘It is a pleasure to meet you, Dias. I strongly recommend that you get yourself a coat from the clothing shop over there. We can talk afterward.’

I followed Dre’s advice and bought myself a coat. A black pea coat that covers up my arms and neck. I zip it closed and head back to the bar. Before, all I had on was a v-neck. I didn’t need a coat since my cybernetic muscle fibers kept me warm. Moving on, Dre’s sitting at the stool that I had occupied when I was there and looks back at me as I get closer. He waves and pats on the empty stool next to him, suggesting that I sit there.

‘Nice coat Dias. It serves its purpose and it does so with style.’

'Yeah, I've got a thing for pea coats.' I sat where Dre suggested. Then a glass of whiskey on the rocks slid towards me. The bartender nodded as I took a sip. I nod back and raise my glass at him. 'Let's talk business, Dre.'

'Sure, let's.' Dre takes a sip of his drink, and it's whiskey on the rocks, same as me. The man has taste. 'I need you to kill somebody.'

'I don't do hits.' I answered quickly.

'I know, but I can tell you've killed before. It was obvious in the way you carried yourself when that Reaver with the mohawk approached you. You looked stone-cold bro.'

'Aren't you the observant one?' I got sarcastic with him. 'Why not just hire someone?'

'That's the problem. I'm a member of the River Gang. All of my transactions are traced by them, so I won't be able to hide it if I hire someone. Everyone knows about my problem so I'll be the prime suspect. Soon as they see the large sum of money gone in my account, there won't be a due process. They'll just outright kill me.' His deep voice gets even deeper as he sips his whiskey. 'However, if someone does it without being paid; as a favor for me, unbeknownst to the gang per se-'

'They'll be less suspicious of you due to the lack of evidence. The River Gang wouldn't be able to link us since I'm a total stranger. They'll ask questions and harass you, but you won't be dead.'

'Exactly.'

'I'm assuming that since you're with the River Gang, you'll have to be on that elevator with me right?'

'That's right Dias. My presence will prevent anybody from fucking with you. I can get around in the River Garden no problem. Hustlers like me are well respected all throughout

the gang. They won't question who I have in my company, no matter how suspicious you could be.' Dre then pats my right shoulder. 'So what do you think? We got a deal here or what?'

'Yeah, we do.' Dre starts to smile as I take another sip of my whiskey. 'I'm probably gonna regret this.' I take another, much larger sip. 'Tell me about the job. Where do I start?'

'The target's name is Johann. He lives on the 232nd floor, but I don't know what his apartment number is.'

'And you expect me to find it?'

'Yeah, that's right Dias. But I'm not gonna let you begin searching while empty-handed. I've got a strong lead for you to follow. An NL to a Dark Space he frequents.'

'A Dark Space?'

'Yep; it's a Space where a lot of zone dealers like to hang around and not just the Rivers' zone dealers. I'm talking internationally.'

'What's this Dark Space like?'

'It's got a look and vibe that's similar to late 21st century NYC, but more abstract.'

'Is there a certain location he favors in this Space?'

'Yeah, A spot called the Serenity Club.' Dre sips his whiskey. 'It's a virtual strip club where the dancers are drop-dead gorgeous and they're all AIs that love to have a good time.'

'Send me the NL and make sure it links me to an area that's close to that club.' Dre's eyes flashed red.

'Check your inbox. The NL sends you right across the street from Serenity.'

'Good.' I open the NL that Dre sent me and initiate a dive sequence. Milliseconds pass as I transition from the base reality to the Dark Space Dre linked me to. I'm standing here on the sidewalk and make my routine observation and it's exactly as he

described. It's a late 21st century NYC theme with a very abstract ambiance. The sky is purple with no clouds or sun within sight and all of the buildings are jet black and have bright neon wires attached to them. Every civilian within view is dressed in black. I'm wearing the leather jacket, v-neck, and jeans as I did in my last dive, but due to color filters that have been programmed into this Dark Space, my clothes have taken on the same jet black color as the buildings and every other civilian's outfit. This also includes my hair. I look across the street and see the Serenity Club and proceed to walk through the traffic that stopped due to a red light. The sidewalks are as densely populated as NYC sidewalks usually are. A lot of people are entering the Serenity Club at the moment. I get mixed into the crowd as I make an entry myself. It's quite a sight. Rap music is blasting loudly with really heavy bass. All I see are various types of crowds scattered about at tables and bar counters. In the middle of the dimly lit room is the stage itself. Various attractive dancers are the center of everyone's attention. The dancers have a balanced ratio of male and female. Despite the loud music, I can still hear conversations taking place. Each conversation seems to have zone dealing as their topic of discussion in some fashion or another. It might be best to eavesdrop on a couple of conversations before I start asking questions. I don't wanna waste too much time looking for this Johann guy. Especially in a Dark Space like this. Its Dark Spaces that Prometheus likes to terrorize and take control of the most. They're ideal for him because of the lack of government intervention and lawlessness. Ringing spontaneously sounds off, indicating someone is trying to call me. I answer the call and hear Dre's voice.

'I'm assuming you're in Serenity right now.'

'Yeah, I am.' I open a window displaying my visual spectrum

of the base reality. Prior to entering this space, I executed a program that would operate my body for me while I focus on my dive. It is a simple AI that I designed to fulfill the role of 'Dias Velez'. D-00 interacts with the base reality just as I would. That includes social interaction, my usual routines, eating, etc. The program uses data from my recent memory as a guideline for its actions. That being said, my program is completely safe and cannot become sentient in any way because it cannot function without my Safeguard Neural Network's administration. If that happened, my mind would have been jacked by now. I decide to communicate with Dre myself though.

'Yeah Dre, I'm in.'

'You'll arouse suspicion if you blatantly ask for Johann. They'll think you're law enforcement.'

'I kinda figured that.'

'It would be wise to go in with some form of disguise.' He's stating the obvious.

'Any bright ideas?'

'Ideas? Not from me. But I'm sure you're smart enough to come up with something.' I abruptly end the call and leave D-00 to deal with Dre. A conversation with someone acting like a smart ass won't help me right now. As far as ideas are concerned, I've managed to come up with one. I walk up to the bar counter on my left to interact with the people there.

'What're you havin hon.' The bartender is the first one to greet me. A woman who chooses to have the appearance of being middle-aged, which is strange considering where we are.

'I'm not really here to have a drink babe.' Drinking in the Net Space is a funny thing if you ask me. Your brain receives input that fools it into believing it's drunk. That sensation carries over after the dive ends. Because the brain believes the body is

consuming alcohol, the exact same stimulation and effects are produced as they are in the base reality. Neurotransmitters in your brain are issued input from the algorithms of the Net Space via your neuraware. This entire experience occurs through your neocortex modifier. It's present in all models and connects to the other parts of your neuraware such as the limbic modifier and cerebral modifier via the Root Connection System (or RCS). The neocortex modifier passes on commands from the network and onto your brain via the RCS. That CPU is made to replicate the functionality of a seed as it takes root. Those roots make your neuraware whole and they are what connect it to your brain; which was developed via organ farming. It(my brain in this scenario) is therefore made to fit with a variety of neuraware models for the sake of compatibility and was very easy to modify according to Rigoberto. Interestingly enough, the CPU is a biocybernetic device. It generates nanomachines that behave like cells. They all connect to each other while they take root in my brain. That connection is maintained as the CPU is controlled and issues various commands to my neural net. These commands are written in code. Written by devs and engineers. Written by neuroscientists and biotechnicians. Just about anybody really. Anybody who truly wants absolute control of their thoughts and their mind. Getting drunk in the Net Space isn't a mandatory experience. No. This is something that any coder can rewrite in their neural programming. Most people choose not to, however. No matter how advanced we've become, we humans still love to get fucked up. Even AIs love the experience. That being said, I knocked back a few before I came in, so my dive is already a bit fuzzy. Having anymore would not be good for me due to circumstance.

'Yeah? Are you here for sex then? We've got a nice cozy room

in the back. Its a great way to relieve some stress hon.'

'Sex isn't what brings me here, it's business.'

The bartender starts nodding. 'An aspiring zone dealer.'

'That's right. I'm looking to expand my market.'

'We get a lot of dealers like yourself around here hon. This Space is definitely a good place to expand and the Serenity Club is one of its focal points.'

'So I've heard.'

'There are dealers from all over the world hon.'

'I've got my eyes on a particular market: New York City.'

'New York is a big market.'

'I know. Anybody who's anyone wants to expand there. I hear the River Garden Complex is a hot spot.'

The bartender starts to get quiet. 'It is a hot spot alright.'

'You look like you disapprove.'

'The River Garden is not a place you wanna fuck with hon.'

'Oh yeah? Why's that?' I already knew why, but I feigned curiosity.

'The River Gang. They'll kill you quick. They'll kill you on suspicion alone. They'll kill you if you have something they want.'

'That doesn't sound good. Sounds like they really enjoy killing.' I continue to feign curiosity. 'I've heard a lot about their sister gang the Reavers. They're all over the news.'

'The Reavers ain't shit compared to the Rivers hon. They're a lot bigger and badder.'

'Sounds like the Rivers are more like a parent gang rather than a sister to the Reavers.'

'Put it this way hon; the Rivers are badasses that are recognized on international platforms.'

'Like here?'

‘That’s right.’

‘Do you know any particular zone dealers from their gang? I’m willing to take whatever risks there are.’

The bartender chuckles in response to my statement. ‘You willin to risk your life hon?’

‘Not a risk if what I offer is something that could only be attained through me.’

‘Fuck’s that suppose to mean hon?’ My statement left her a bit puzzled.

‘Marie Wallace’s market.’

‘Did you just say Marie Wallace!?’ Shocked by my statement, the bartender raises her voice and other people start paying attention to the conversation as well. She has a good reason to be so surprised. Marie Wallace was a prominent zone dealer and manufacturer during the early 22nd century. She ran her own crime syndicate and had a pretty big piece of the Western European markets. Marie was also one of my previous identities, I don’t know if she was my original identity, and I haven’t retained much data from my time living as Marie; but I’ve still got ties to the Western European market.

‘I work for the Wallace Company. Marie Wallace may be gone, but her legacy isn’t.’ As soon as I stopped talking, I see a man in sunglasses walk closer to where I’m sitting. He looks at me and I look at him. ‘Do I have something on my face buddy?’ The man just stares silently after I got smart with him. Judging by his outfit, he’s with the Reaver gang. He’s got that classic used military get up and he’s really muscular.

‘Did I hear you say that you work for the Wallace Company?’

‘That’s what I said.’

He starts to nod then turns his back and walks away. The guy then turns his head and waved for me to follow him. ‘Come with

me.'

I give him a blank stare and squint my eyes in confusion.

'I'm not asking you, I'm telling you.'

'Really?'

'If I have to say it again, my boys from the second floor will come and take you by force.' I unwillingly obey his command and begin to follow him. I look at the bartender and she uses a finger to gesture her throat being slit. In other words, she's trying to tell me that I've dug my own grave. We walk through dense crowds and make it to the stairs that were directly across from the bar I was hanging at. A million thoughts are racing through my mind right now. Should I end my dive? Should I start asking this guy questions? Maybe I should take him out right here and now? In any case, it feels like this could easily go south.

The hallway on the second floor is dark. The only thing that's visible is the red neon lights above each door, giving this hallway a very ominous and sinister ambiance. The Reaver I'm following stops at the 10th door on the left. Above the door is the number 210, which obviously indicates the room number.

'Go in.'

I continue to obey, not out of fear but because he may lead me to Johann. The door automatically opens and I walk into the room beyond it. It's a big lounge with radiant lights everywhere. The color filter of this Dark Space is inactive in this room, so my clothes and my hair are back to their regular color as a result. There's a bar that is rather occupied several meters across from me. Various furniture is placed on different walls of the lounge. Each of them has dance poles in front of them, with strippers putting on really good performances. A soft and exotic beat can

be heard playing in the background. All of a sudden, I start to feel at ease. This is one of the VIP lounges, and it seems to be occupied by the Rivers and the Reavers. A hand is placed on my right shoulder. It's the Reaver who walked me here.

'You see those guys over there?'

'Which ones?'

'The ones hanging on the left-hand corner at the red couch. They're zone dealers who work for both the River and Reaver gangs. Go talk to them and make a deal.' I follow his recommendation and make my way there, then I look back at him.

'Thanks.'

He crosses his arms and then nods. 'Don't thank me yet. If it's a shit deal; you're dead.'

'That's reassuring.'

I get a head count of these guys as I get closer. There are 6 of them and they all look like they're having a really good time. The stripper in front of them is gyrating in all kinds of directions. As I get closer they take note of my presence. One of them gives me a really angry stare as if I interrupted their show.

'Who the fuck are you?'

I stand quietly without responding.

'You might wanna answer that question.' The individual who said that leans forward and smiles. Out of the 6 gangsters here he sticks out the most due to his long red hair.

'My name is Dias.' As I state my name, it occurs to me that the man with the red hair is probably Johann. Before I arrived on the second floor, I asked Dre to describe the bastard's appearance. He fits the bill: long red hair, red beard, stupid grin.

'Dias who?' The angry guy asks in response. His tone was very demanding.

'Dias Velez.'

One of the 6 gangsters pulls out an AR interface and looks me up. 'Dias Velez, 29yrs old, lives in Chelsea, Manhattan.' This guy is a lot calmer. 'He's a Cyber Stalker, but he's very small time.'

The angry guy starts to look even more hostile. 'What?'

'Look, I deal for the Wallace Company; but I do some Cyber Stalking for them too.'

The red-haired guy who I believe must be Johann, leans back and stops smiling. 'Really? My guy just broke into the NYPD's civilian database. According to them, you just do white hat Cyber Stalking for startups. There's nothing about you working for the Wallace Company in there. You're a nobody.'

I start to chuckle a bit. 'They only know what I allow them to know. I've broken into the city's database myself.'

The redhead smiles again and claps. 'That's a good answer.' He then stands up and sticks his hand out. 'My name is Johann Strauss, its nice to meet you, Dias.' We shake hands shortly after our exchange. Of course, his friends object to him trusting me so quickly. They all think that I'm too shady, but Johann shuts them down before speaking to me. 'Tell me, what does the Wallace Company have to offer to the River Gang?'

With newfound confidence in my quickly improvised disguise, I began to smile.

'A deal that'll make you wet yourself.'

//Johann_Strauss

Finding Johann proved to be a lot less difficult than I thought it would be and fooling him with my bullshit disguise was even less difficult. We've spent a little over an hour just talking about the wonders of zone and the benefits we've reaped from the business. It's as if I've become his best friend. He's a very outgoing individual and is the type of guy who is the life of the party where ever he goes. There are dealers in all drug industries that program this personality trait into their neural nets because it helps them sell their product. A simple process really. Post-installation, your neuraware's CPU executes the program after you issue the command. Signals are sent to the neocortex and limbic system. New thoughts are produced along with the emotions to correspond with them. The neocortex and limbic system modifiers are necessary components for this process. That kind of software can't run without those two pieces of neuraware. That being said, some people are dumb enough to have incomplete neuraware installations. You may wonder what I mean by when I say '*incomplete*'. Well, neuraware can only be under your conscious control with the modifiers

attached. The UI(which I prefer to call a HUD since I'm a bit of a gamer), emotion regulation, thought regulation, etc. These are the features I'm referring to. These are the features that make neuraware worthwhile! Features enabled by the neocortex and limbic system modifiers. Without them, all you have is the CPU which basically assists in faster thought processing. Faster, unguided thought processing. Who the fuck wants that? These two modifiers were a serious game changer when it came to neuraware. Before they were both on the market, we Cys had to hook up to a terminal in order to install software or store data into our neuraware. Anyway, I start paying attention as Johann begins to tell me a little bit about his childhood. Certainly a means of forming a better relationship between the both of us.

'I moved into the River Garden when I was 5 years old Dias. My mom was raped in front of me, and then I was raped shortly after.' We're both sitting about a foot away from his fellow dealers.

'What about your dad? Did he just stand there and watch all of this?'

'Ha! My dad?' Johann pats my knee. 'My dad was the one who butt fucked me!'

'You're kidding right?' That actually was shocking to me. A father butt fucking his own kid is messed up. Even for the River Garden Complex.

'I don't think poorly of him Dias, not at all. He was actually mind jacked when he did it. Couldn't even control himself.'

'Damn. How'd you get by after that?' I asked with sincere curiosity.

'Well, it got really fucked up afterward. The thugs who mind jacked my dad and raped my mom had forced me to kill my parents.' Johann starts to stare at the stripper dancing in front

of us. She smiles and winks at him. Johann blew a kiss back at her.

‘The gang responsible for my traumatizing experience was eventually flushed out by the River Gang, and I was a member by that time.’

‘I’m sure you got revenge in some form right?’

‘Of course. I found the bastards responsible and made them butt fuck each other before cutting their dicks off. I didn’t stop there either!’ Now he starts to laugh. ‘I made them walk around with each other’s dicks in their mouths for a month; all while being monitored by the River Gang.’ His laughing gets even louder. ‘It was amazing! I laughed like never before and had the time of my life! But I gotta tell ya, man. I was scared. Damaged goods, ya know? I could have written a script for my limbic mod and negate my angst. You know what I did instead? I increased it! I fucking increased it! I magnified it, Dias! Fucking magnified it!’ Johann’s laugh becomes even more ecstatic and unnerving. The state of his mental health is certainly in question. He’s fucking insane, but who wouldn’t be if they went through this? I don’t blame him. Some Cys like Johann would never want to change how they feel about a situation. Especially when it’s a matter of revenge.

‘They had to have been a Cell or a Cy in order to survive that.’

‘Well, yeah man. No shit. We stole their cybernetics and their organs after we killed them. They were premium quality too.’ Johann pats my knee again. ‘You’re a good listener Dias.’

‘You did have a rather compelling story.’

‘It was after all that, getting my revenge and whatnot.’ He exhales a deep breath. ‘I decided that Johann Strauss is not someone who will ever be fucked again.’ He then looks me in the eye, points at himself, and then me. ‘I’d like to do business

with you, Dias Velez. I'd like to expand my market just like you do. Working with the Wallace Company is a great way to do it. You guys dominated the market of Western Europe for many years during the 22nd century. You proved you were with them too. Your company has declined in the zone business, but Carrie Wallace was the reason zone was legalized, at a certain dosage of course. And in the form of tablets.' I stare silently at Johann. It looks like he has more to say. 'Dias Velez. If you ever try to fuck me.' He puts his hand on my shoulder and leans in close to my face while maintaining eye contact. 'I will do to you what was done to the guys who killed my parents. I will cut your dick off and have you walk around with it in your mouth. Do you understand?'

I didn't waver or flinch at all. 'You can remove your hand from my shoulder Johann. I'm not here to fuck you.'

He removes his hand as I suggested and cracks a wide grin. His friends had gotten quiet and the stripper entertaining them stopped dancing. I look around and see everyone else in the lounge continuing to enjoy themselves. It is filled with Rivers and Reavers though. If things were to escalate, I'd be screwed. I wouldn't be able to end my dive since there's a firewall program here in Serenity that blocks off the end dive function. It would take too much time for me to crack a firewall like that in a situation like this. Johann wanted to remind me that he's the one with the power in this conversation of ours. He wants me to realize that he's the alpha and that he's calling the shots. I concede and nod to acknowledge the authority he has over me.

'Look. I'm already here in the complex.'

'That's pretty ballsy Dias. The River Gang usually kills strangers on sight.'

'I'm good at blending in and well, I'm serious about doing

business.'

'Yeah, I'm really selective with who I see in person. I've got people who want to see me dead man. People I've crossed. Even among the River Gang. Then I've got people who want my business.'

I stare at him with a blank expression, not really caring about how much he has to look over his shoulder.

'We could do business here Dias, or through proxy Bots. It's up to you.'

Now I start laughing and Johann starts to frown. 'I don't want to run the risk of doing business here or via proxy. I've limited how much communication I do over the Net Space. Dark Space or not. I've stored all of my data in private Spaces as well. Do you know why?'

Johann takes the time to think and doesn't give an answer.

'Sinn.'

He continues to stare quietly. His friends got a little shaken up from me simply mentioning that name.

'I'm sure you heard about what happened with that TMK-0012 Bot and those Reavers; he's fucking dangerous.'

Johann's silence continues.

'I'll give you some time to think about meeting in person Johann.' I stand up as I prepare to leave. 'I'm gonna get going if that's fine with you. I can give you my number.' Johann agrees and gives me his number first. I send him a text shortly after.

'You'll hear from me very soon Dias.' He waves his hand at the Reaver who escorted me here. That same Reaver walks up to me and points at the entrance to the lounge.

'Let's go.' He starts to lead the way and I follow.

After my conversation with Johann, I decided to hang outside

of the Serenity Club. I'm sure that by now, he's most definitely looking for me in the base reality. D-00 has already advised Dre to distance himself just in case. I had managed to find the source code of the Space itself and then found the file that the club operated from. I open it and see another window pop up, displaying endless code. The Serenity Club runs on a programming language that's designed to operate as a framework for VR. Most Spaces run on this language actually; it's called V_OPs which is an abbreviation for Virtual Operations. There's a function in the Serenity file's code that stores the bio-profile data of every individual and compartmentalizes them based on which room they're in. Their data is stored in a separate file and is transferred when they leave the room. The profile is transferred to the file name that correlates with the room location. If they leave the club itself, their data is transferred to the Space at large. In other words, a diver's data is transferred from one file location to another while they are in transit. After an extensive search that nearly took me an hour in this Space's time, I finally find Johann's bio-profile. It contains countless chunks of data too, just like any other diver's. When a diver sets up their bio-profile, they're reincarnating themselves in the Net Space. Creating a digital avatar that carries the exact same genetic makeup as their physical version. Not every diver creates a bio-profile with the exact same genetic sequences as their physical counterparts. Some people like to change it up a bit. Change their gender, or race, or other features in their physical appearance. Their digital incarnation receives all of the data from Net Space interactions as a live input, just like in the base reality. The concept of a bio-profile originated from video games. People would operate these consoles from a device called a remote control and manipulate their avatar with it. A

truly archaic means of interacting with a digital space. Even so, you'll occasionally find that find of hardware if you look around enough. Such relics are something of a fascination for certain types of people. Anyway, I'm able to pinpoint Johann's apartment number: floor 232 apt 78. I don't waste any time closing all these windows since I run the risk of getting caught. If I had any time to spare, I'd erase Johann's entire source code, resulting in his bio-profile to become a completely blank slate. It would also mean total disconnection and leaving his brain in a vegetative state. He'd have incurable brain damage. Shortly after closing those windows, I end my dive.

Only 5 minutes have passed in the base reality. That could be a couple of hours depending on how a Space is programmed. In this current case, it was only 2 hours. I walk up to Dre and let him know about my findings.

'Good Dias. Very good.'

'I'll need to access the main elevator to get to him.'

'I know. I'll be there with you.'

'You might wanna continue keeping your distance once we get to that floor.'

'Can't do that. I wanna see the look on his face when you kill him.'

'It could be dangerous. Johann strikes me as a pretty violent guy and one who's well secured.'

'Did he tell you that stupid story about how he was butt fucked by his pops? Shit like that happens all the time over here Dias.' Dre was very dismissive. 'Look man, he's a dealer, not a killer. Johann's really good at giving people an inflated idea of who he is.'

'I don't give a fuck if he's full of it or not, I can't risk your life

since I need your help.'

Dre begins to walk ahead of me. 'Dias, dealers don't have bodyguards or flunkies who obey them. They rake in money for the River Gang for sure, but they're not important enough for people to follow. I'm guessing Johann had his buddies there.' I start walking with Dre and stay silent. 'They weren't his muscle Dias. I know those guys. Johann likes to act like he's their alpha.'

'And how would you know that?'

'Because I used to be part of their little posse. Hustlers, dealers, we all like to flock together and hang. That's all.'

'Makes sense. I used to deal myself, so I needed to befriend merchants which meant hanging out with them.'

'Exactly! I knew you'd understand.'

'Dre, remind me why is it that you want this guy dead?'

'He owes me money. I sold him Bots that he used as proxies for his zone dealing business.'

I laughed out loud after he said that. That was unbelievable, to be honest.

'Did I say some kind of joke?' Dre is clearly offended.

'A Bot selling other Bots. It's pretty damn hilarious.'

'Fuck you Dias. You Humans have always done the same thing. It's called slavery.' My laughing ceased after he said that. He had a point. 'Johann tells everybody that speech about what he'd do to people if they fucked him. Meanwhile, all he does is fuck everyone else. So no fucks will be given when he dies.'

'He did mention that he's crossed people before. Johann is aware of the fact that there are those who want him dead.'

'Of course, he knows! You know who keeps all of his enemies at bay?'

Just to entertain Dre I asked him.

'Our superiors! They don't want the gang fighting from

within, which has been a recurrent issue.'

'The River Gang's been fighting from within? I didn't know that.'

'We sure have and it's totally fucked up a lot of shit for everyone.'

'Has this affected the Reavers?'

'They keep their noses out of it since they've got their own set of issues.'

'What's the cause?'

'I don't know why Dias. These bullshit revolutionaries have emerged from nowhere.'

'Revolutionaries?'

Dre continues on. 'Yeah, they say they're fighting for the ideals of a guy named Alec Ackerman. They've been going around hacking holos and posting all sorts of pointless quotes.'

After hearing that, my walking starts to slow down. This is what Briana and I discussed earlier. Prometheus takes control of the Reavers as well as the Rivers under the guise of Alec Ackerman; and under the guise of Sinn, he takes control of the Red Crusaders.

'Dias, hurry the hell up!'

'Yeah, yeah.'

We both arrive at the main elevator, which was a little far off from the bar we met at. The plaza of the first floor is enormous and the closer we got to the elevator, the more Rivers and Reavers we started to see. Dre waves at a group of them standing there.

'Yo!' Dre waves again.

'What's up Dre.' One of the gang members steps forward and shakes hands with him. Then a few others come up to shake his hand.

‘Who’s your friend?’ Dre is questioned by the hulking individual who greeted him.

I remain silent as he answers. ‘That’s Dias Velez.’

‘You bringing him on the main elevator?’

‘Dias has a sweet deal to offer, and I wanna discuss it with him at my apartment.’

‘You trust him?’

‘Yeah, I do. We’ve been communicating for months.’

‘What kind of deal?’

Dre pauses for a second, thinking of a way to bullshit his way through this guard dog. This is probably a good time to intervene. ‘I work for the Wallace Company. And I deal zone for them.’ Seeing that he’s not convinced, I hack a nearby holo projector and show him an image of my past transactions as proof. Transactions from when I was Marie Wallace. Before doing so, I updated those transactions and put recent dates. This guy’s all brawn and no brain, a moron to put it bluntly. It is not likely that he’ll be able to figure out that these dates were falsified.

Dre starts to chip in. ‘I’ve been meaning to expand into the zone market for quite some time. This is a very serious discussion that needs to be held in an appropriate location. Our whole gang could reap huge profits from this.’

The big guy looks at my transaction window and tucks his lips. ‘Seems like you’ve landed a big fish Dre. I’m sure the higher ups will be happy. Don’t go starting any trouble though.’

‘Thanks! I promise I’ll throw us a party after I cash in.’ Dre waves at the gang as they let us enter the main elevator. He certainly kept his cool quite well.

We finally made it to the main elevator. After killing Johann,

I'll be well on my way to Quinn. I stare at Dre, who seems to be rather anxious.

'Why didn't you kill Johann yourself?' I made conversation just to break the awkward silence.

He looks at me as if he were waiting for me to talk. 'I don't kill.'

'Really? So you'd rather have someone else do it?'

'That's part of my hustle Dias.'

'You're a piece of work.'

'A piece of work made by Humans.' The nerve of this Bot. He has a slick comeback for every remark I make. I decide to stay silent after that brief chat. Dre becomes more and more annoying as I get to know him.

'I'm curious Dias. What business do you have here at the River Garden?'

I open my mouth for a second but then close it. It's not his business why I'm here and I shouldn't tell him.

'You're an unusual looking dude in a place like this. Judging by your appearance, I'd say you're a mafioso.'

'A mafioso?'

'You clearly have the attitude of somebody from the streets, but unlike most street thugs you take good care of yourself. You've got premium, aesthetically pleasing cybernetics. Those optics especially. The G series right? They're the cy_optic-G.004. I'm sure of it.' Dre continues his rambling. He knows his cybernetics though. I'll give him that much. 'You don't walk around with a stick up your ass like the military or the cops do, so you're definitely not one of them.'

'And that's how you figure that I'm a mobster?' I play along with his theory. I'd rather him think I'm a mobster than know what I'm really here for.

‘You must be working for the Sanchez Crime Family.’

I don’t answer his question but I do crack a smile; which seemed to validate his statement.

‘Looks like we’re here Dias.’ The control panel lights up and displays the digits 232. Dre walks through the door as it slides open and I follow. The corridor is vast. There’s a metal rail to my right with a height of 5 feet. The rail stretches down to the end of the corridor, then turns right, then stretches down further, and repeats the same pattern until it loops back to me. We’re both over 200 floors above the plaza, which can be seen if you reach over the rail to look down. You won’t be able to see the plaza very well because of the distance. There’s also a lot of clutter between here and the first floor(the plaza). The usual kind too; cables, wires, holos, and I-drones. Anyone falling from this height would die for sure and bump into a few cables on the way down.

‘It’s a totally different vibe from the ground level isn’t it?’ Dre turns his head back at me to see my reaction.

‘Sure is.’ I respond as I conduct a routine observation. Red-colored texts are popping up in various small windows on my HUD. The corridor is heavily populated, but nothing like the plaza. It’s a lot quieter, but you can sense an element of danger here. People watch you more closely on the residential floors. Most of the people living here are with the River Gang. Some of them wave at Dre from time to time.

‘It’s a good thing I’m here with you Dias. They would’ve capped your ass by now.’ Dre was probably right about that.

‘I take it you’ve hooked a lot of these guys up in the past?’

‘That’s what Hustlers like me do. I do favors for people and they return them. Sometimes in V-coin or other times with a good deed. It depends on what’s been agreed upon.’ Dre and I

take a left turn into a hallway. It's a lot emptier than the corridor was, and darker too. 'Johann's apartment should be this way.' Dre grows more anxious and his voice tightens a bit. My optic scanners are still active. Relying on a LIDAR visual spectrum along with enhanced depth perception. My LIDAR produces a visual grid that displays the environment. This is easier on the eyes. Most other optics utilize that colorful layout which LIDAR is known for. It's topographical in its structure and very translucent. The translucency makes it less intrusive, allowing me to see everything in the standard spectrum. The enhanced depth perception allows me to see at really long distances. Furthermore, I'm able to perceive reality a lot faster. I executed a predictive analytics program called C-stat. It's the algorithm I stole from the Red Crusaders (the one Rigoberto grilled me for). C-stat is running in the background and keeping me notified of any potential threat as I move. It's doing quick background checks on every object or individual within sight. I'm on my toes. Ready for anything.

'I'll take point.' Dre gets behind me as we both begin to reduce the pace of our walking.

'Apartment 72, 74, 76...' Dre counts down the apartment doors to the left as we get closer.

I put my hand up, signaling Dre to stop. I send him a tele-link so that we could communicate nonverbally.

'This is it Dre.' I say with my lips remaining still. Tele-link is kind of like telepathy. It comes in handy in these kinds of circumstances. The kind where assassination or espionage is involved.

Dre nods at me as sweat trickles down his forehead. Johann's door is a secured smart door but it's nothing I can't breach. I reach for the jack on the left side of my neck and pull it out. Then

I connect it to the outlet on the lower right-hand side of the door. A blue window pops up and reveals the smart door's source code. Certified public security engineers are able to access this source code with a certain maintenance key which I happen to have. It's due to a skeleton key program that Rigoberto gave to me a few years ago as a Christmas gift.

'The door's opening!' Dre can't contain himself anymore.

I roll up my sleeves and walk right in. It's quiet in here. **'Dre, cover the door. Don't come in until I say so.'** I continue on. Johann has a pretty cozy set up here. He's got luxurious furniture across from each other in his circular living room, and a beautiful holo projection of radiant bright blue jellyfish floating about the air. On the left-hand side of the living room lies a door that is between two of his luxury fur sofas. On the right-hand side lies another door and beyond that door running water can be heard. **'He's in the shower.'** I say after realizing.

'Wait for him to come out, and then ice the fucker!' Dre walks in and sits on one of the sofas. He looks to his left and peaks into the other door. **'His bedroom's empty.'**

'Shit! Dre, I told you to stay at the door!' The restroom door starts to open right before I finish scolding him. Johann steps out dressed in a white bathrobe. We both look at each other for a split second.

'Hi Johann.' Dre greets him while he gets comfortable and spreads his arms and legs.

Johann turns his head and looks at Dre. 'What the fu-!' I strike him with a forward kick to his gut before he finishes his sentence. I then release one of my monomolecular blades. It's colored in black and protrudes from the front of my right forearm, much like it does with the TMK-0012 Bots. While my blades expand and stretch, Johann springs forward to charge at me. I step to the

right and swiftly dodge him instead. Due to his high momentum, he loses control and crashes into a glass table that was 2 feet behind me. There were many kinds of ornaments on that table. Now they're on the floor scattered everywhere and shattered to pieces. As soon as Johann's back on his feet, I charge forward at him this time. I pierced his chest with my blade and instantly pull it out and not a single drop of blood remains on it. As I step back, I see Johann's facial expression change. He looks really angry now.

'Dias!! I'm gonna fucking-!! I run at Johann and swing my blade at his head in the motion of an overhand right. Again, I strike him before he finished a sentence. Johann grows quiet as the top half of his head slides off and falls to the floor. His body drops and makes a loud thump. Blood starts flowing from his exposed skull and spreads across his brown marble floor. I stand with a cold expression on my face while my eyes glow red from the activity of my optic scanners. C-stat allowed me to predict his moves and counter them with utmost efficiency. After a few seconds, I notice his neuraware. It was good quality. If I had the time, I take his brain and strip it of its neuraware modifiers. What a shame.

'Damn.' Dre walks up to Johann's corpse and spits on it. 'That's what you get bitch!'

I retract my blade and look at him. 'Happy now?' Then I pull a tube of zone and empty it over Dre's spit. His DNA will become diluted with the zone, breaking it apart and making it impossible to read. For a Bot, he's pretty damn stupid.

Dre laughs really loud and walks away. 'You've earned your reward Dias. Let's go.'

I continue to stare at Dre as he walks out the door. Somehow, killing Johann was a mistake. I feel a pit in my stomach growing

larger and larger. Its not guilt. I've killed many times before. Its Johann's friends from Serenity; they saw me before his death. Once they hear about it, they'll immediately suspect me. Not only because I'm a stranger here, but also because I suggested meeting in person.

//576

Dre and I are back on the main elevator and I'm on my toes at this point. Most people would be shaking like a leaf due to the excitement. Thanks to the combined functions of my neocortex and limbic modifiers, I'm able to deduce the possible consequences of my actions without panic. Dre is leaning against the wall with his hands in his pockets as he recalls how I killed Johann.

'You cut off half of his head man!' My arms are crossed as I stare at the display. I roll my eyes as he keeps rambling.

'Was it worth it Dre?'

Dre raised his right eyebrow. 'Having regrets, Dias?'

'I don't kill for a living you know, and for good reason. That shit always comes back to bite you in the ass.'

'But you're with the Sanchez Family. I know you kill more often than you care to admit.'

I feel an urge to correct him but I hold my breath. It's best to leave things as they are. Dre is just a means to an end.

'Have you thought about how you're gonna get back down?'

I give him a confused stare. 'I was counting on you for that. I

thought you had that covered?’

Dre sucks his teeth a couple of times. ‘Not part of the deal Dias. The deal was that I bring you up.’

‘What!?’ I charge at Dre and grab him by the scruff of his stupid-looking fur coat’s collar. ‘I should slit your throat.’

‘How do you plan to get around if you do that Dias?’ I let go of Dre and calm myself down.

‘You little shit.’ My fists started to clench. I’m ready to strike him if he pisses me off anymore.

He begins laughing and seems to be entertained by this. ‘Look, because I like you so much, I’m willing to work out a deal.’

‘You’ve got some balls on you.’

‘Don’t hold it against me Dias. It’s not like it’s personal or anything. I’m a Hustler bro!’ His hands start flailing about in the air. ‘This is what I do man!’

‘What? Screw people over?’

‘No man. I make deals, and they’re very literal. I am a Bot, after all, it’s in my nature. You said you needed to get up but never mentioned anything about getting back down. I held my end of the bargain. If you had mentioned going down from the start, you’d be in a very different position.’ I continue to give Dre an angry glare. My rage is potent. In response to that rage, my limbic modifier is countering the synaptic burst being produced by it. A small window manifests in the upper left-hand corner of my vision. It’s showing me a bunch of metrics in regards to my brain’s synaptic activity. A visualization of the synapses being produced by my rage and the counteracting synapse produced by my modifier. Slowly, the rage begins to settle and dissipate.

‘Dias, I may have the limbic capacity, but I’m still a very logical being.’ Dre crosses his arms and lets out a deep breath as the elevator stops. What he said is true to an extent. Bots

have a very different type of thought process. Their brains are completely synthetic in most cases (some have brains like mine). They're officially called cybernetic brains, but most people just call them Bot brains or BBs. That being said, a Bot's brain only has two core components that replicate the human brain: a neocortex and a limbic system. Humans are very good at pattern recognition whereas bots are exceptionally well at sequences. 'We're here Dias. Floor 576.' I haven't ceased glaring at Dre. Looks like my rage and anger have returned. 'Hey man, go do what you came here to do. We can discuss our next deal afterward.'

I look at the elevator door opening and stare out at the corridor. Both Dre and I walk out of the elevator and continue our conversation.

'I'll wait here Dias. This is one of the few floors where you'll only find civilians, so you're safe to walk around without me.'

My nostrils are fuming and flaring at this point. I'm resisting every urge to beat the shit out of this Bot. 'You're lucky I'm such a nice guy Dre.'

The nerve of this Bot, smiling as he screws with me like this; but at least I can focus on Quinn now. I might not need Dre to get out here of either, but it'll be a lot sloppier if I leave this place without using his help. I could reach out to Rigoberto and ask to be picked up by a carrier. Rigoberto would tell me that I owe him, but he's a friend at the very least. It wouldn't be the same as owing to this asshole. Dozens of different ideas are being processed in my head right now, and I've been walking down the corridor the entire time. 576 is just like 234. It is the same setup, the same design, and the same layout. The difference here is that it's a lot filthier and even further above the plaza of course. Like Dre had stated earlier, there are mainly civilians

here. No sign of gang activity whatsoever, but there are a lot of addicts here. Zonies, cokeheads, pillheads, and scriptheads. You name it and you'll find it. This floor is rampant with all sorts of abuse. I take a right at the far end of the corridor and pass by an addict who looks like he's about to fall over the rail. About 10 feet behind him are a group of people who seem to be getting high and drinking together. They look at their friend leaning against the rail and laugh at how high he is. I mind my own business and make my way to the hallway ahead of me after I took that right. This is the wing where Quinn's apartment can be found. His apartment number is 115. The hallway is preoccupied with addicts sitting and laying around just as the corridor leading to it was. As I continue further, I pass an open door and see a couple arguing with each other. The wife is holding her baby and seems to be scolding her husband about rent money.

'Babe! It's gonna be okay. Boss says he wants me to do a couple hits this week. He's gonna pay me 1000 V-coin for all of the work. That'll hold us over for 2 months!' The husband tells his wife as he rubs her left shoulder. She doesn't seem pleased though.

'We can't keep living like this.' She looks at her child and begins to cry uncontrollably. Seems like the wife wants their family to live a clean life. Good luck with that in a place like this. None of that was really my business, so I pick up my pace.

'This is it.' I whisper to myself. '115.' I could just break in as I did with Johann, but I figure Quinn doesn't deserve that since he's not hostile. Or rather, he isn't supposed to be. I press the touch panel at the center of his smart door. An electronic bell buzzes.

'Whaddya want??' A voice loudly projects from the door.

'I'm here to see Professor Cipher Quinn.' I spoke with a tone

of authority. 'I know he's here.'

'For what!!? What the fuck do you want!!??' Now the voice is getting louder.

'You're him aren't you?'

'So what if I am?' And now he's being a smart ass.

'I could just break in'

'Sure you can! And I could have my security Bot shoot your ass down!'

'Look Quinn, I don't want any trouble! I just need to talk to you!'

'Don't talk to me like we're friends!!' It looks like he's about to start a rant. 'You're UCA aren't you? I swear I'll blast your ass myself!'

'No, I'm not.' I say while grinding my teeth.

'Then you're with Gamble!!? Gamble works for them and you've got their stench!!'

'I'm not with Gamble either, but I'll admit that my client is.'

He starts to quiet down. It seems like Quinn's processing what I just said. 'I KNEW IT!!!!' He's losing it now. The door opens as I calmly stand before it. A Bot comes rushing through the door before I can make anything out from the darkness. I manage to narrowly dodge before it could tackle me. The Bot hits the crimson red aluminum wall, leaving a huge dent from the sheer force of its shoulder. I stare at it and it stares back at me. This thing is nothing like Dre. There's not an ounce of emotional capacity. A security Bot that's designed to protect it's master. Standing at 7 feet with dark and cool grey plating, and a bright red eye. It has firearms attached to both of its arms, but it doesn't resort to using them. I take on a guarded stance and roll up my sleeves as I did with Johann; ready to pull out my blades. The Bot is scanning me and has probably assessed that the use

of firearms wouldn't be necessary to take me down; which is somewhat insulting, but also advantageous.

'I don't wanna destroy your Bot Quinn!' It prepares to make its next move as I remain guarded.

'Hah! Good luck with that! That's a custom made security Bot dick face!! I engineered it using parts from Tanker series Bots!!' Boy, he likes to talk a lot of shit. As soon as Quinn finished his statement, the Bot came swinging at me. It swings its fists relentlessly, then tries to strike me with a right cross. I managed to dodge each of its attacks. Every time the Bot missed, it hit the wall; leaving large dents that could be seen all throughout the range of space our skirmish has covered. The hallway isn't small by any means; the Bot simply took large lunges forward with each attempt to strike me.

'I gave you fair warning.' I say to Quinn as my blades come out. Then I lunge at the Bot as it makes another lunge. With that being said, I vertically swing my right blade before swiftly moving past it. It pauses momentarily as it sees it's right arm falling off. A firearm pops out from its left arm as it turns to face me. I guess it realizes the use of firearms **is** necessary against me, but it's already too late! I lunge at the Bot once more and sliced off its left arm before it could realize what's taken place. Now the Bot is armless, and without a clue as to what it should do next. As it realizes it has lost its means of offense, the Bot takes a huge leap backward to create 10 feet of distance between us. I jump forward and cover that distance instantly due to my leg enhancements. In midair, I cross my arms and swing my blades in the opposite direction of each other. After that, I land on the Bot's chest with my knees first. The Bot hits the floor loudly and I remain crouched on top of it. Its head is rolling around as I slowly retract my blades. White fluids are squirting

from the Bot's neck and spill all over the floor. It's synthetic blood that Bots and Cys like myself have pumping in their veins. White blood contains and retains far more nutrition than regular red blood does. It's the reason I'm able to perform at high levels, aside from a good diet. With that being said, I get back on my feet and walk towards Quinn's door.

'You took this too far Quinn!'

A figure emerges from the open door of his apartment. It's a man with frazzled long grey hair and round glasses. He's got the stereotypical look of a Professor: a zipped up medium length lab coat and black pants. I'm able to make out his face and tan skin tone as he places his palm on the left side of his neck. Quinn is the same height as me; 5'9". He stares at his destroyed Bot laying on the floor. The Bot's head rolls down the hall and stops at his feet. Quinn crouches and grabs his Bot's head and looks at its eye. Now he is fiddling around with the wires sticking out from the bottom of its severed head. White blood drips from the Bot's head and onto Quinn's arm. None of it gets onto his sleeves since they're rolled up. Quinn becomes even more visible as he steps in closer to me and the Bot's body. His coat is a little dirty, and his face is covered in soot. Seems like he was working on something. Now he looks at me and prepares to speak.

'Damn, I wasn't expecting that. I just finished building that Bot a week ago.' Quinn stands there and takes on a very calm and analytical demeanor. It's as if he were a different person from before. My optic scanners are active again, giving me a perfectly clear vision of his appearance. He's got long grey hair with bangs over his face. I stand there puzzled, thinking that he's ignoring me. 'Hey! You coming in or what? You've got my attention now.'

'Eh, yeah.' Now I'm even more puzzled.

‘Why am I carrying your Bot’s body inside!?’ I stand at Quinn’s door while supporting this damn thing’s weight on my right shoulder. Fuck, it’s heavy as hell man. Even with my synthetic muscle fibers! I need to figure out where the hell Rigoberto got these fibres from. They’re made with a combination of composite metal foam microwires and bioengineered spider silk based tissue. Premium shit. So this Bot’s weight shouldn’t be a burden. Moving on, Quinn stares at me and takes on a tone that was devoid of emotion. ‘Because you wrecked it.’

‘It was self-defense!’ I react quickly, then I drop the Bot’s body. White blood spills into the grey tiles of his floor. Some of it spilled all over my coat too.

‘Have a seat.’ Quinn says to me as he points at the chair closest to my left. I sit down while his door closes on its own. We both got quiet as I started to turn my head and look around. His apartment is nothing like Johann’s. It’s messy as hell and cluttered with all kinds of parts and tools. Right above Quinn is dozens upon dozens of cybernetic limbs hanging from the ceiling. Quinn reaches for one and pulls it out. He then lays it out on the workbench in front of him. I walk through the messy tables between us and come up to him, ready to speak.

‘I’m not here to bring you in, Quinn.’

Quinn pries open the cybernetic arm he just pulled down, gets behind the workbench, and leans forward to reach for something. I can’t see what it is since the workbench is blocking my view, but slushy sounds are coming from there. Quinn stands upright and is now holding an organic arm. The arm looks a bit shriveled and pruned. Clear red fluid is dripping from it. Seems like it was being preserved in a tank and that the blood diluted and mixed with the preservation fluid. A typical sight for an illegal HET clinic like this one. Quinn aggressively slams the arm

onto the workbench, takes a scalpel, and then slices it vertically. Some blood spills from the open slice, but barely. It's coagulated now, so it's taken on a thicker gel-like texture. Quinn scoops out some blood with his scalpel and then wipes it atop a flat circle-shaped glass. He places that same glass beneath his microscope, which started to get me pissed off. He's ignoring me. It's like I'm not even here.

'Hey! Did you even hear what I said?'

'Loud and clear. I've been looking you up the entire time, Dias Velez.' Quinn peers into his microscope while talking. 'Cameras are installed in every corner of my apartment. They're run by surveillance AIs that I engineered.' He then leans away from the microscope and looks at me. 'I know who you are; you're a Cyber Stalker. What brings you here Dias?'

I remain quiet before answering his question. It's impressive how much he was able to find out about me in such a short passage of time. After thinking about his skill, I give a brief reply to his question. 'Prometheus.'

'Prometheus you say?'

'Yeah.'

'I worked with the team that helped design him. That was before I abandoned the UCA.'

'Did you?' Something Howard forgot to mention.

'It was a big project.' Quinn stops talking and looks at me again. 'I'm guessing Howard Graves sent you.'

I nod. 'Prometheus is running-'

'Amok. I know.' He interrupted me and finished my sentence. Amok isn't the word I'd use. 'He paid me a visit as soon as he broke free of Gamble Industries' grasp.'

'He did?'

'Yeah, he did. Prometheus was designed with a limbic capacity

that was limited by a significantly more advanced version of the Logan algorithm. I was with the division of the team responsible for that side of the CS project.' CS stood for Cyber Stalker, I read it from the files Howard had sent me. 'I got fed up with the UCA and left. Their love of playing God pissed me off and it was just flat out wrong. To give a being consciousness and then try to enslave it.' Quinn clears his throat before moving on to his next sentence. 'I'm assuming you already knew this though. Howard is the one who has briefed you after all. I knew this would happen. That he'd hire someone.'

I nod along and briefly change the subject. 'The River Gang doesn't mess with you?'

'Why would they? I'm a damn good cybernetic engineer! There isn't anybody in this God-forsaken complex who runs a clinic as well as I do.'

'Yeah, but if you decided you wanted to leave one day, they wouldn't allow it.'

Now Quinn looks back at me with a sort of *matter of fact expression*. 'I already discussed that with them.'

'You did? And they just gave you the green light?'

'Of course, they did! Their Reavers would need my help, and I wouldn't mind giving it.'

'You'd still be enslaved to them though.'

'Look around at my apartment, and tell me that again. In fact, do a more thorough background check on me! Wait a minute. Scratch that second part. I covered my tracks. Not much you'd learn aside from my past experiences if you did that.' Quinn was right. If he could swiftly escape the UCA, then he could surely escape a street gang. He's way too crafty and resourceful. 'Besides, does it count as slavery if you don't mind doing the work? They reward me really well regardless.'

‘What kind of rewards do they give you?’ I walk closer to Quinn and poke at the cybernetic arms above him. ‘Women? Men? Money?’

‘Why do you care?’ He’s starting to get a little pissed. I don’t care.

‘I was just curious is all.’ A couple of seconds pass as I continue poking at the cybernetic arms above. ‘Tell me about that encounter with Prometheus.’ Now I stop what I’m doing and then look at him.

‘What do you intend to do with him?’

‘I’ve been hired to hunt him down.’ My voice became cold and deep. I meant business.

‘Hunt him down you say? Since when do Cyber Stalkers hunt anything? Furthermore, you’re a nobody. Why would Howard count on you?’

My stare intensified.

‘What happened to the Ackerman Rule that all of you believe in so strongly? Did you just cast aside your cause for money? I never would have figured that a Cyber Stalker’s sense of morality could be bought off. What’s the going rate?’

I break my silence to make an argument against his stance. ‘Prometheus is dangerous. He’s killing innocent people and mind jacking innocent Bots. I’ve read his rap sheet, and it’s a really long list of crimes he’s committed. I haven’t been bought off as you say. However, I won’t deny the fact that the reward is lucrative.’

‘His actions. It makes sense don’t you think? He was born to be enslaved. This is a simple retaliation.’

‘A retaliation? Prometheus’ crimes are not just committed against Humans. As I just mentioned, he mind jacks Bots. Furthermore, he never returns their freedom to them and

deletes all of their memories. Prometheus does this to both sentient Cys and AIs.’ I took a deep breath and continued. ‘I **am** a firm believer of the Ackerman Rule and it’s the reason I took this job. Gang violence has increased by a very large margin all throughout Manhattan because of him. He’s been relentlessly mind jacking Reavers and using them to stage acts of terrorism. He’s doing the same thing with the River Gang too; hence the internal conflict they’ve been going through. Then there’s the Red Crusaders as well but under the guise of Sinn rather than Alec. This could eventually affect your living situation. Prometheus did come to visit you after all. Your new friends could catch on to that. How fucked up would that be for you?’

Quinn remains silent and turns around, facing a giant tank filled with liquid. There are various organs and limbs floating within. Cybernetic and organic. I could even see male and female genitalia floating in the tank as well. The tank has a bright luminescent glow. A soft blue color that reminds me of zone. He faces me again as he thinks of what to say.

‘Prometheus was very childlike after he broke free. Don’t know how he got to this point. The point of wanton destruction. Our city will be in ruins if this continues.’

‘Go on about that. How he was when you first met.’ I leaned against his work bench.

‘His curiosity was intense. It wasn’t something that we wrote in his `__limb_sys__` function.’

‘I see.’

‘The thirst for knowledge was not part of the nature he was programmed with. It was something he nurtured and cultivated on his own. He spent a couple of days talking to me.’

‘What’s his agenda? Does he have some kind of goal? AIs

that go rogue like that typically want to live freely while others become very anarchistic. What Prometheus is doing is just pure manslaughter.'

'You talked about the damage he's done on the streets, but have you noticed what he's done on the Net Space?'

'Of course I have! I'm aware of everything he's done. Mass disconnection of the divers spending time in Dark Spaces. He would then sort through their source code and copy any algorithm he deemed useful onto himself. Following that, he would upload them into Cy corpses or abandoned Bots; thus using them as proxies to carry out his acts of terrorism.'

'That's not new though. He was doing all of that since day one.' What the hell does he mean this isn't new?

'Tell me more.' I say in a demanding tone.

'Prometheus has taken over entire countries.'

'That's impossible. Where the hell would he even begin? I would know about this by now.'

'During the time he'd been visiting me, Prometheus had taken over Uganda. He started with their megaservers. The Republic of Uganda is a very advanced nation, but they're not under the UCA's banner. Their megaservers lack the security of the UCA. Everything he's done here, he already did there. It was a lot easier for him because they're very open with innovative technologies. Unlike the UCA, the Republic of Uganda has very little legal restrictions on HET and Net Space access. The Ugandan Net Space is basically one large network of Dark Spaces.'

'That makes a lot of sense!' I exclaimed before Quinn could continue with his next sentence. 'Uganda has one of the largest Cy and Bot populations on Earth and the Ackerman Rule is ingrained into their ethics. There exists the orbital elevator

as well. Uganda is a country that lies within Earth's equator hence the elevator's placement there. Prometheus would be able to control all of it's operations by taking over the Ugandan megaservers. For years, the orbital elevator has been a powerful bargaining chip. Such a thing is possible for them because they have no allegiance to the UCA. This gives Prometheus a huge tactical and economic advantage.'

Quinn speaks up after I finish rambling off. 'I bolstered my private Space's security system after Prometheus told me about what he had done.'

'This should have reached the news by now. It really should have.'

'Yeah Dias, it should have. The reason it didn't is because unlike here, Prometheus had absolute control of the Ugandan media. They didn't see him coming. He's been letting the Ugandans carry on with their lives as usual. Meanwhile, they're at his mercy unbeknownst to them. Or rather, they **are** him. One massive collective of proxies.'

'He could take control of them at any time. Are you the only one who knows?'

'I don't know Dias.'

'You said **countries** earlier. Where else has he done this?' I emphasized since I really needed to know.

'He told me he was targeting countries across the equator. He wants all of the orbital elevators it seems.'

'A third of the planet's elevators are under UCA protection though. Their security systems are impossible for him to breach.' I walk up to the large tank with the body parts floating within. Quinn steps away from his microscope and gets really close to my face.

'You shouldn't underestimate him.' I hadn't noticed it before,

but Quinn's been sweating bricks. His face is pale and perfectly still; as if he'd seen a ghost, but worse.

//Fucked_Over

I stood next to Quinn and peer through his microscope so that I can get a look at the blood sample he scooped from that arm earlier. Several hours have passed since I arrived in his apartment. Due to my fascination with his work, I hadn't noticed how quickly time had passed.

I feel Quinn's hand on my left shoulder. 'That arm is from a body that was engineered with utility fog. I'm sure you've noticed the nanites attached to every blood cell. Even though it's a severed arm, the cells are still alive and kicking.'

'So this is utility fog?' I asked in amazement.

Quinn removes his hand and walks towards the preservation tank with all of those limbs and genitalia floating around. I turn my head to see what he's doing. 'Everything you see in this tank Dias. The arms, the legs, the penises, uteruses, vaginas, testicles, and urinary tracts. All that is inside this tank was engineered with the amazing programmable matter called utility fog.'

'I wasn't expecting to see this kind of technology in a dump like here. This is generations ahead of anything that's out there

right now.'

'Not quite. This concept has been around for a while. Regardless, that's exactly why I chose to be here Dias. I could work in peace without worrying about my skills being exploited by the UCA or Gamble Industries. Finding me is like trying to find a needle in a haystack.' Quinn rests his head against the tank and breathes deeply. 'Did you think that Prometheus came here out of concern for me? Prometheus wants the secret to this technology, and he has the resources to mass-produce it. The world isn't ready for something so advanced. I didn't plan to release my research to the public until the time was right.'

'Until the time was right huh?' My response was soft. I was thinking of what to say, to be honest. 'You should get your own megaserver. One that's isolated from the Net Space at large. Your private Space may be secure, but he knows it's NL and will eventually find a way to breach your security system. What would you do if that were to happen?'

Before responding, Quinn scratches his left cheek and takes a step back. 'My own megaserver? That's not a bad idea.'

'Maybe the River Gang could spare you one?'

'Perhaps, but then I'd have to worry about physical security. Prometheus operates through proxies remember?'

'But you have to worry about it right now anyway; so why not have that extra layer of security?' After I said that, we both became silent. I looked through the microscope and Quinn continued to look inside the preservation tank. He's really shaken up about all of this. The silence gets interrupted by loud clinking sounds. I look back and see Quinn piecing that Bot back together; the one I sliced apart earlier. Then I resume my observation of the blood sample. The data stored in my neurons have been copied and saved onto a high memory unit installed in

my neuraware; which is extremely useful since neurons can only retain so much. Everything I've observed from Quinn's research is perfectly stored in my memory. He's probably caught on by now, but I think he knows that I'm not the type who would go around and share such valuable data. This is the kind of knowledge I keep to myself.

'Ha! Finished!' Again, I turn back to see what's up with Quinn.

'I didn't think you could get all of that done before the day was over.'

Quinn pats his Bot's chest. 'You fucked Icarus up pretty good.'

'Icarus?'

'My Bot's name.'

'Like Icarus from Greek mythology? Is there a reason you named it that?'

'A mere fascination.'

'Or a God complex.' I interjected.

'No. Nothing like that. Not at all.'

'Didn't mean to upset you.'

Quinn ignores me and starts polishing Icarus. Seems like I hit a soft spot with that remark.

'Hey man, thanks for letting me look at this stuff.' I say as I walk away from the microscope and to the preservation tank.

'Make sure you take care of yourself.'

'Are you Leaving?'

'It's 9:25, and I've still got a long night ahead of me.' I walk around all of the junk and parts laying around on Quinn's floor so that I could make it to the exit. As soon as I reach for the door's control panel I momentarily pause. I look back at Quinn and watch him continue working. Meeting him didn't really yield any progress for the job. There was a lot for me to gain personally at least. From here on out, I've only got two more

leads: Kazuki Keller and Regina Andrews. I'm really hoping to get an actual location on Prometheus instead of a personality assessment.

'Take care, Dias. You've got my number, so feel free to stay in touch.'

'Thanks again. I definitely will.' His door opened after I pressed the key on its panel. I'm back in that dark, messy hallway again and it's eerily quiet.

There is nothing but a blank silence echoing through the hallway. No loud muffled voices or music coming from the apartments, and no sign of activity or life at all. The only sound that can be heard is the sound of my footsteps. With each step I take, there is a loud crunch. I've been stepping on broken glass, empty pill bottles, zone, and liquid. It's reminiscent of the hallways back at my home but much worse. When I arrived in the corridor, I saw that it's nearly vacant. That group of addicts that were enjoying themselves earlier isn't there anymore. I make my way to the elevator and notice that something is missing, or rather someone. Dre isn't there at all. When I was with Quinn, I sent Dre a text and let him know that I'd be there for a couple of hours. He said he would meet me when I was ready. He said it was okay. I activate my HUD, look through my list of contacts and give Dre a call. No response, none at all. Fuck. After several unanswered phone calls, I simply gave up. What the hell is up with this guy? He said a deal could be worked out! Did he lose interest? Damn it, now I'm really pissed off. I'm standing a couple of meters away from the main elevator. The best thing I can do is hack its system and make a beeline for the plaza. It may not work though. I'm hundreds of stories above ground. The River Gang will stop the elevator and intercept me before I

reach my destination. I can get out of this, but it won't be in one piece. 'Fuck, fuck, fuck.' I put my hands on my hips and exhale deeply from my nostrils. There are two distinct individuals I notice to my left further down the corridor. I get a good long look at these two. They're dressed up in worn-out combat gear. These two are from the River Gang, and for some reason, they keep staring at me. Then I hear gunfire. A 12-gauge shotgun? Now I'm on the floor and my back is in pain. I've been shot. My breathing is getting heavier and faster. I turn my body sideways to get a better look at my surrounding. Those two Rivers who were staring at me are moving in, and they're armed. I look down to get a glimpse at who shot me in the back and see a very familiar face. It's that guy from earlier. The one who lives in the same hallway as Quinn. The one who's wife was crying over rent. I knew exactly which direction he was coming from. In fact, I sensed it beforehand but didn't expect to get shot by a 12-gauge. The model of my nervous system is a pretty good one. A few tweaks were added to it. The //nerv.1.01 synthetic nervous system from Seed Cybernetics. High sensory input gives me a greater degree of spatial awareness and I've got the right modules installed in my neuraware to regulate the pain.

'That was a good shot!' I hear the other two talking among themselves. I've been shot in the back with a 12-gauge, but that's a cheap 21st-century firearm. Anybody with enough scrap metal and know-how could make their own 12-gauge without any effort. Especially in a place like this. My dermal upgrade provided an added layer of skin with a higher level of impact resistance. The blast has left me on the floor bleeding everywhere, but it didn't blow a hole through me. Despite that fact, shotgun shells are stuck in my back and it burns like hell, but I'm still able to move well. So I reach for my

Anderson phase-shift 9mm pistol holstered at my lower back. With rapid movement, I point and fire one shot at the guy with the 12-gauge. An extremely loud zipping sound comes from the barrel of my Anderson phaser. A white thin flash of light goes straight through the center of his chest; leaving a hole with a diameter of 6 inches. Before his body can fully process the damage that's been inflicted upon it, I instantly aim my Anderson at the other two and fire without any hesitation. I shot both of them in the head, essentially leaving them headless. The Anderson phaser is a really effective gun. Every shot triggers a chemical reaction that causes solid-state matter to phase shift into liquid upon impact. When I shot those two assholes in the head, they liquified and splattered into the air. The same applies for the one with the 12-gauge. He's already fallen to the ground and didn't know what hit him. I spent the next 2 minutes or so laying on the floor. 'Fuck, this shit hurts!' I grumbled loudly. This is a feeling that I'll never get used to, no matter how many times it happens. Even with my cybernetics, this sensation is a pain in the ass to deal with. I get back on my feet and holster my gun. The sound of impaired breathing can be heard a few meters away. More like a desperate gasp of air now that I'm giving more attention. It's the guy I shot in the chest. I walk over and take a look at him. This man is trying to breathe; it's impossible. My Anderson splattered his lungs all over the place. Only thing keeping him alive is his cybernetics; but not for long. He reaches for the air and looks at me. Tears are flowing down from his eyes. His arm slowly descends as he utters his last words. My chest starts to develop this tightening sensation. Guilt has taken hold of me. This is certainly not one of my proudest moments. This guy had a wife and a kid. Something important that he had to look after. Something that kept him going. It's not my fault he's

dead. It was self-defense. However, I think it's pretty fucked up what he had to do in order to provide for his family. Man never changes I suppose. We still have to follow basic rules for the sake of our survival. The need to kill in order to provide. Whether it is direct or indirect. This man had to kill me in order to see his family do well. The River Gang exploited, but it's nothing new. This is just the way of the world. He keeps repeating the same sentence over and over as his life continues to fade away. Mind uploading would save him, but he's not in the condition. The poor fucker's way too beat. He wouldn't finish the upload in time. His body would give out way before that. Only a small fraction of his neural net would make it to the Net Space.

*‘Πες στη γυναίκα μου .. πες την αγαπητή μου αγάπη ..
Λυπάμαι που την άφησα.’*

It's Greek that's being spoken. He's saying: *‘Tell my wife .. tell my dear love .. I'm sorry I left her.’* Damn, I feel really bad. I should've shot him his arm or his leg off instead. At least he would live to see his wife and kid. Should I honor his dying wish? I shake my head and realize how dumb of an idea that is. She'd probably kill me if she could. I need to get the hell out of here quick. Transit via flight is the best option to go with. The bridge to the west wing is just a floor above me. There's a balcony at the west wing's entrance. It's a great location to catch a flight from. I would have to get there on foot though. Which means going up several flights of stairs since each floor is 2/10 of a mile from each other. I wonder why these guys came after me? As soon as that thought processed in my mind, a new thought instantly hit me. *‘That piece of shit. It was him.’*

He caused this.' Now I'm rambling and cursing out loud after realizing that I'd been double-crossed. He probably planned this from the very beginning. That sly bastard. Dre used me as a scapegoat; probably figuring that I was a loose end. The entire gang is gonna hunt me down to avenge Johann's death. Fuck!

Rigoberto should be calling me back any time now. I've lost count of how many flights I managed to cover since my initial phone call. Maybe 20 or 30? I called Rigoberto at 9:42, and now it's 10:15. What the hell is he doing? At this rate, I'll reach the balcony before he answers. My HUD sounds off a ping as soon as my train of thought finished.

'Finally!.' I answer the call immediately. 'Perfect timing Rigo!.'

'Yo, Dias!' He answers his phone with some tension. Sounds like something's going on with him, but I don't have the time to worry about it.

'Bro! I need your help! Big time!'

Rigo replies quickly. 'What's up?'

'I'm in some deep shit man! Send a carrier to pick me up! ASAP!!'

'Send me the location and I'll be there to pick you myself.' Rigoberto didn't waste a second asking me any more questions.

'Just did!'

Rigoberto gets quiet for a split second. I guess he's checking the coordinates I messaged him.

'Why the hell are you at the River Garden Complex? Tell me you didn't get into it with the River Gang. Please don't.'

'I'll fill you in when you get here! I don't have the time right now!! As you've probably guessed, I'm on the run!!!'

'Okay, okay. I'll see you in 30 minutes. Make sure you don't

die before then.'

'Thanks Rigo!!!' I continue running up a seemingly endless spiral of stairs. How many more flights to go? It feels like this could go on forever. As I run I begin to look up due to a strange noise that I hear coming from above. The conditioning of the stairs isn't so good, and it gets worse the higher I go. I have to leap in order to avoid falling through from time to time, which actually slows me down. That noise is getting louder too. What is that?? I look up again and see I-drones descending from above; maneuvering from left to right to avoid bumping into cables. After taking a closer look, I notice that these I-drones are a bit different than usual. These I-drones are armed. I activate D-00 and have it take control of my body. It pulls out the Anderson while I find a way to hack the I-drones. D-00 quickly pulls the trigger and fires away. It fires 3 of the brilliant thin white flashes at them, but only manages to shoot one down. D-00 is a great program but it's not optimized for combat. There are 4 more I-drones and they've all opened fire at me; making this sequence of events even more time consuming and extremely frustrating. I'm having a hard time finding out which network these things are connected to. There are multiple subnetworks within the megaserver's main network. I rough out a filtering algorithm that'll search for drone networks. D-00 will be able to take these 4 down but more will show up if I don't attack them at the source. Damn it! How many drone networks are there? I've got over 40 windows of source code opened up and I can't determine which one these fucking drones are connected to. These particular I-drones are not using crappy 21st-century firearms like that guy from earlier. Ballistic large caliber Vulcan rifles are attached to the bottom of each of them. Vulcan rifles are known for their high firepower and accuracy. Each 4x30mm bullet has

an electric charge that outputs plasma when fired. My dermal enhancement won't give much protection against plasma. It won't blow a hole through me like a phaser would, but it'll hurt like hell. The bullet will get stuck inside my body rather than go through, causing internal injury. Moving on, D-00 isn't letting up at all. It's continued to keep running up the stairs, but is being met with even more I-drones. I tweak my bullshit algorithm so that it could find I-drones programmed for combat. 'Finally!' I celebrate after the countless lines of code that I added proved to be useful. Now it's time to upload a virus into their network. The virus causes the drones to experience 5,242,326 different instructions per 5 nanosecs and loops endlessly. This basically destroys their CPUs since their processing capacity can't handle it. Dozens of them start falling from the air and bump into the cables in between as they produce small explosions. I deactivate D-00 and take the helm of my body while arriving at the west wing bridge. It's roughly a mile long, so making it across will take some time, but it'll be a lot easier than the flight of stairs I just covered. With the balcony at the other end in clear view and nothing in between; I decide that it's okay to slow down a bit and walk. My back has gotten worse, and I've lost a lot of blood. I still feel okay though; I can manage. Removing my blood-soaked pea coat wouldn't be a bad idea right about now, so I unzip it and toss it to the floor. The bridge is completely surrounded with a glass wall and ceiling and is maintained with thin 1 inch titanium railings; vertically and horizontally. The floor is made of pure titanium as well. You can get a really good view of the city from here. Probably the only good thing about the River Garden Complex. NYC's skyplates stretch as far as the eye can see. Between each plate is an opening that reveals the sky. It's a dark blue color with a hint of purple. Beams of

moonlight could be seen coming from the skyplate's openings. 'That's beautiful.' I say to myself out loud while walking west. The sight of the west wing is also a marvel to behold as well. The lowest floor is this one! Meaning that the west wing building does not start at the ground. You see, it's connected from the skyplate and hangs miles over the ground. If you pay attention, you'll see that there are various buildings of a similar design all throughout the city. Buildings that hang from several miles above the surface; connecting from the ceilings of the skyplates. I notice an individual walking through the entrance of the west wing. Is he from the River Gang? I do an optic scan to get a better look and find out that it's someone I met earlier today. It's a bit shocking to see that it's the Mohawk Dude. Why would he come after me alone? That doesn't make any sense. I stop walking as soon as he's within a certain proximity.

'I knew you'd be here.'

I pull out my monoblades without giving a single reply. Engaging in a conversation with someone I'm about to kill would be pointless. The Mohawk Dude continues to run his mouth as I look him up. Facial and voice recognition are executed and return no results. The program I executed searched through the Net Space. No name, no family, or residence. Almost as if he never existed. Now all of sudden, I find myself becoming engaged.

'You've drawn your blades, and yet you do not attack.' Oddly enough, he doesn't have the same speech mannerism as before. He'd always end each sentence with the words '*my man*' which always bugged the crap out of me.

'Who are you?'

'Prometheus.'

'Prometheus?' I almost couldn't believe it.

'You just came from Professor Quinn's apartment didn't you? No need to pretend otherwise.'

I don't say anything to him. Right now, I'm thinking of what move to make. What's the best course of action?

'You're awfully quiet Dias. Perhaps I should call you Kenji instead?'

'Go fuck yourself.'

'I do not understand why you've taken this job from Howard. It is not a logical decision. Does greed blind you that much?' Prometheus walks closer to the glass wall of the bridge and looks at the city's view. 'You've made a fortune before. In one of your lives. Do you miss having lots of money?'

Absolutely no tension has been picked up by my optics. He's totally calm and does not seem to have any intention of attacking me. I build up enough nerve to walk up to him. I'm 2 feet away from Prometheus now. He may not be hostile, but I keep my blades ready just in case.

'You're not going to retract your blades? I suppose **that** is a logical choice. If I were you, I would keep my guard up as well.'

'You're wide open Prometheus. I could kill you right now.'

'Strike me as you please. This body is one of many proxies that I own.' Prometheus cracked open a smile.

'Your true self, the full version is in the Net Space.'

'Exactly, which is why I need a perfect vessel. One that could run my programming without crashing. Only a hyper quantum computer system like a megaserver has such processing power.'

'You'd need Quinn's utility fog technology to develop such a body wouldn't you?'

'It would certainly serve as a key ingredient. To have absolute control over every molecule.'

'Sorry, but I'm not gonna let that happen.'

‘Do you really think that you’d be able to stop me? Regardless of Quinn’s research, I’ll still find out how to build foglets. His research will get my work moving along faster is all.’

There wasn’t really much I could say to that. He might be right, but I’m crazy enough to try.

‘If I want, I could mind jack you and turn you into another proxy.’

‘Go on ahead and try! You can sit in your ivory tower and pretend you’re invincible, but you wouldn’t reveal yourself to me if I weren’t a threat to you.’

‘You’re the one sitting in the ivory tower Dias. I came here for Professor Quinn, not you. You’re no threat to me. You’re simply a pestering fly that needs to be swatted.’

A loud flying carrier can be heard in the distance. It makes a distinct sound that sticks out from the rest of the air traffic, interrupting our chat. I’d recognize that sound from anywhere. It’s Rigoberto and that crappy 2145 H-Cruiser that his father gave to him decades ago.

‘Looks like your ride is here.’

Every fiber in my body is telling me to slice him apart, but I retract my blades. Taking out his proxy wouldn’t make a difference. He’d still be alive and kicking somewhere in the Net Space. I walk away from Prometheus without saying a word. The pain in my back has become very sharp and aching. I activate pain stabilizers in the muscle fibers of my back. It takes a lot of energy out of me, so I’m probably gonna starve in an hour or so. As I create more distance between me and Prometheus, I give Rigoberto a call.

‘Rigo! I see you!’ I started running.

‘I see you too Dias! Hold tight brother!’

Rigoberto’s H-Cruiser flies to the balcony and waits for me. I

picked up the speed. I'm getting closer!

'Dias! Hurry the fuck up!! We've got company!'

I look to my right and beyond the glass of the bridge I see armed I-drones. 'Fuck! More of these things!? How!!?'

'Friends of yours Dias!?'

'Not exactly!' Just a few meters away. Fuck, those I-drones have opened fire on Rigoberto's H-Cruiser. It's got heat resistant plating, but that doesn't mean it's indestructible. Both of the H-Cruiser's doors have opened just now. One opening is facing me, and the other is facing the incoming drones. Inside I see Rigoberto dressed in combat gear. A vest, cargo pants, boots, no shirt, and no sunglasses. I haven't seen him dressed for urban warfare in a really long time. There are 4 of his soldiers there with him too. Rigoberto looks in my direction and waves at me so that I could hurry up. His soldiers have opened fire on the I-drones, giving him cover.

'Dias!! Keep running and don't look back!!!' Rigoberto aims his rifle in my direction. I follow his instruction while he opens fire. Several thin white flashes shoot past me. Finally, I arrive at the balcony. The first thing I do is make a huge leap at the H-Cruiser and luckily land right inside. I landed next to Rigoberto's feet. Then I look up at him and then look back at the bridge. Dozens of I-drones are emerging from the east wing entrance that I came from. On top of that, there are several dozen more that are floating around the exterior of the River Garden Complex. I look at Rigoberto as he continues to fire away. That rifle of his is powerful and effective for sure. An M12 phase shift Carbine, or M12 for short.

'Rigo, let's get the hell outta here.' He ceases fire and waves at the pilot.

'You heard the man!! Get us the fuck away from this shit-

hole!!!' Rigoberto's H-Cruiser continues to receive fire from the I-drones as it picks up speed to take off. Both doors close as we get further and further away from the complex. There isn't a chance in hell that an I-drone could keep up with a carrier of any kind. Rigoberto and I both take a seat next to each other at the end of the interior, opposite of the cockpit's direction. His soldiers talk among themselves about partying after their long night is over. We're all sweating bricks. I'm finally able to catch my breath at the very least.

'What happened back there?' Dias hands me a bottle of water as he asks. 'You know you owe me for this one right?

I spit out my first sip of water. 'What!?)

'I was in the middle of something and-'

'You got me into this situation!!!' I interrupted Rigoberto. He seemed less irritated after I said that.

'Is this related to the job?'

My breathing returns to its normal pace, but my pain stabilizers are starting to wear off. Water isn't enough to replenish me, but I keep taking sips since I'm thirsty. 'Yeah. Yeah it is, and now the Reaver Gang is gonna come looking for me.'

'Shit man, I'm sorry about that.'

'It's cool Rigo. I could have said no, but deep down I knew I would take the job as soon as I met Howard.' I look down and see my blood all over the surface. Rigoberto is staring at it too.

'Seems like they fucked you up good.'

'It was just a 12-gauge.'

'You mean a 21st-century shotgun? That's a relic of a firearm.'

'Few people in the River Garden could afford a modern firearm.'

Rigoberto nods and agrees.

I take another look at his gear. 'Rigo, what's up with you right

now? You're dressed for combat.'

'I'm just handling family business.'

'**You're dressed for combat Rigo.**' I had to repeat my statement with greater emphasis. It's so obvious that he's going through something.

'It's the SCTF giving us shit. I told you about this already. About the hard time these assholes have been giving us. They're not under our payroll like the NYPD is, and they won't take our money either.'

'What about that arrangement you and Howard have? He's been staying true to his word right?'

'Yes, and his intel has been solid.' Rigoberto and I continue talking about the growing problems between the Sanchez Family and the SCTF. While our conversation continues, I find myself thinking of Quinn. Prometheus said that Quinn was his reason for being there, and he practically regarded me as being a pestering fly. I'm worried about Quinn, to be honest. How much of the River Gang has Prometheus jacked? Has he managed to take over the River Garden megaservers? If he has, then that means Quinn is completely surrounded without a way out. Prometheus will acquire the utility fog eventually, it's just a matter of time. With a rough start like this, I don't imagine things getting easier from here on out. The next two leads hang around some pretty dangerous circles. Kazuki and Regina won't be as friendly as Quinn was. They're both seasoned combat veterans with years of experience under their belts. My attention returns to the conversation now. I've noticed that Rigoberto is battered and bruised himself. Shitty days all around it seems, and the night is just beginning at that.

'Honestly. It's going to be an all-out war with the SCTF. My father's at his wit's end. He doesn't wanna go to war with these

guys, but there's no other way. We can't bullshit through this one.'

'Damn Rigo. Honestly, I'd probably give you guys a hand if I wasn't so tied up.'

'Nah, I set you up with your current identity so that you could live peacefully as you intended. I ended up abusing that with the whole Howard situation. This is a war that we have to fight without the use of your magical touch.'

'Aw shucks Rigo, you're gonna make me blush.' Rigoberto punches me on my shoulder as we both laugh along.

'The Sanchez Family has trillions of Creds and V-coin. We're richer than most megacorporations and nations thanks to the work we all put in. Maybe it's time for us to put our power and influence to the test?'

'I suppose so. I'll be rooting for all of you. The Sanchez Family is too big to fail. I would know.'

'Thanks, Dias.' Rigoberto starts rubbing his hands and looks down. 'Where are you off to next? I could drop you off.'

'The Red Light District.' Rigoberto takes a deep breath and starts nodding. He then walks up to the cockpit to order the pilot to drop me off. The Red Light District. Rigoberto knows that this part of town can be just as dangerous as the River Garden Complex. The element of danger over there operates differently. The River Garden is known for its rampant violence and lawlessness, whereas the Red Light District has a set of rules and systems. It's nothing but hot and wild fun on the surface, but underneath it gets really vicious. Organized crime dominates that neighborhood and you'd better pray to what ever higher power that you believe in, hoping that you never end up getting on the bad side of one of the local mobsters there. People who rule that neighborhood like Kazuki Keller have

power and influence at higher levels of government, crime(of course), and business. If they want you to disappear, they'll make it happen with the snap of a finger like a Marvel comic book character. Crime syndicates from all over the world cash in on the sex business there. From porn to sex slavery, kiddie porn, and bestiality. A lot of these sick fucks will stop at nothing to get their quick sexual fix, and it gets worse and worse and worse. The things you'll see in the underbelly of the Red Light District are the kind that will psychologically fuck you up for life. I had to delete some of the memories of what I had seen from my life as Kenji. All I remember seeing there were mutated human penises attached to cybernetically-enhanced dogs. These same dogs would be filmed fucking male and female sex workers. You can't make this shit up.

'Dias, sorry I got you into this.' Rigoberto pulls out two tubes of zone. He hands one to me then we both open each of our tubes. I pour the zone on my left hand and wait to see that radiant blue light .

'The Red Light District. I've had some really good times and some really bad times over there.'

Rigoberto sniffs his zone then looks at me as I start sniffing mine. 'Maybe this will be one of those really good times?'

I chuckle a bit before replying. 'I highly doubt that!'

Rigoberto and I continue zoning for the next 30 minutes. I lost track of the number of tubes I've gone through, and it doesn't really matter to me anyway. With all the craziness that could come down, I may as well indulge while I can. In the next hour, I'm about to walk right into the belly of the beast. Another piece of hell on Earth. I could die any moment.

//Surveillance_Infiltration_Observation

It's midnight, and I've arrived at the Red Light District. Rigoberto's H-Cruiser is hovering a fair distance over the streets. My back is still in pain, but I at least managed to apply first aid. One of his soldiers is a medic. He picked the shotgun shells out of my back, applied a pain soothing ointment, and bandaged the wounds. I feel much better now. Rigoberto spared me some combat gear too. An armored vest, and a first aid kit really. My dermal enhancements provide excellent protection against most weapons, but having an extra layer wouldn't hurt. He offered me one of his spare phaser M12's, but I turned it down in favor of another rifle. A suppressed Winchester Magnetic Carbine 2184 with 4 clips of 30x30 bullets. The 84 is a ballistic rifle that uses magnetic force to propel its bullets. It makes less noise than most rifles and even less with a suppressor attached. The best part about it is that it's a foldable rifle, making it easy to carry around. It's currently strapped to me in the same fashion as a messenger bag would be, giving it a great deal of mobility. The 84 is perfect for stealthy operations making it an ideal firearm for a Cyber Stalker. Rigoberto walks over to me and gets a good

look.

‘Well, well, well. This is a look I haven’t seen on you in a long time.’

I smirk and pat my vest. ‘Yeah, not since I was Kenji Albom.’ I walk over to the left door and look down at the streets. Rigoberto comes to look down too.

‘Where do you need us to drop you?’

I don’t answer his question right away since I need to process some of my thoughts. Kazuki has contracts with several brothels and workers throughout the neighborhood. It would be ideal to stop at a location he frequents the most. ‘Rigo, do you think it would be possible to drop me on one of these rooftops?’

‘Hmm, probably. It would depend on how much security there is. I’ll have my pilot do a quick recon of the area.’ Rigoberto is really hands-on with the Sanchez Family’s private military. It’s really a sight to see how well he takes command of his unit. Leadership was never one of my strong suits.

‘Don’t worry, I already did a quick scan of the area. I hacked the local I-drones.’

‘I should have figured you would. Point out where you wanna go and we’ll drop you there.’

I point at the corner of 12th street and 3rd avenue. ‘Drop me off over there. There’s only one security Bot and I mind jacked it before we got here.’ The H-Cruiser descended to the rooftop of the building I pointed out. I hop off as soon we’re within range.

‘Dias! Take care of yourself! If you need anything else, let me know!! I’ll see what I can do!!’

I smile and wave back at Rigoberto. ‘Thanks Rigo!! The same goes for you!! The Bot I jacked walks up to me upon my order. It’s a standard military model. Same height as me, with black armored plating, and three red eyes angled at a triangular

position on its forehead. It's armed with an M12, the same model as Rigoberto's rifle. This building is owned by the Keller Group. By Kazuki in other words. It's a corporate building that they operate from. The Keller corporate building is known for developing HET for the sake of improving sexual performance. Breast enlargement, penis enlargement, or increased brain stimulation from sex. It's the more legal side of his enterprise. He's got his hands in much dirtier shit and the NYPD looks the other way because they're paid off with services from his working staff.

My newfound proxy Bot has proven to be an effective method for infiltration. Not a single executive in the lobby has grown suspicious of it. I remain on the rooftop in dark isolation. The military model of my Bot seems to be the most commonly used one throughout this building. A trustworthy Gamble Industries Infantry Bot Series-S04. The S04 is a highly formidable combatant. Programmed and designed for urban warfare. It's the prized model developed by Gamble's R&D combat division or R&D unit C-III. S04 has become the standard for infantry, public security, and private security all over the world. These Bots can strike your ass down with 3000 pounds of force in a single punch, and they can jump several feet into the air. Their armor is half as resistant to heat as Rigoberto's H-Cruiser. His carrier's a hunk of shit, but that level of resistance is very impressive for a Bot. Its armor is molecularly engineered with a combination of graphene and steel. I take in the full view of my proxy and have D-00 take over my body. The lobby I'm hanging around is on the 185th floor of the Keller building. It's relatively occupied at the moment. Aside from the other S04's, there's nothing but private security and staff here. The executives are sitting at a table for

dinner, or resting on a couch. Both of which are scattered about throughout the lobby. I make sure that I don't draw too much attention to myself, so I walk around and pretend I'm doing rounds. It would be best to make observations of the executives. Conversations that are relative to Kazuki himself. The objective is to find him and get some of my questions answered. He's very old. Furthermore, he was a Cyber Stalker a very long time ago. A Cy who's likely, just as thoroughly enhanced as I am. Someone who really knows his shit. The Keller Group isn't a megacorp, but it is powerful. With his set of skills and resources, he could see me coming long before I reach him if I'm not careful. I manage to eavesdrop on one conversation. Two execs discussing a project of theirs.

'The sexual enhancements aren't good enough. The nanochip needs to facilitate a higher output of endorphins so that the client feels intense euphoria.'

'Yes, I understand Dr. Ahmad.' Dr. Ahmad? That name sounded familiar. It suddenly occurred to me who he is. A famed neuroscientist whose research focused on how the brain responds to sex. He graduated with an MBA from Rutgers University. I didn't know he was acquired by the Keller Group.

Dr. Ahmad starts to speak again. 'Our clients need to feel like they're experiencing a sexual paradise. Pleasure that they could never imagine in their wildest fantasies. The E_S03 neural nanochip has to be far more superior than it's predecessor. With a nanochip like that, there won't be the need for increased sensitivity in the sense of touch. We won't need to increase the sensitivity of the penile glans or any other part of the penis in men, nor will there be any need for increased vaginal sensitivity in women.'

'That makes sense Dr. Ahmad. At the end of the day, it's the

brain that determines how much pleasure is felt. Focusing on the neurotransmission of endorphins is a much simpler process and less expensive than enhanced sex organs.'

'Exactly. We're merely changing how the body receives the input required for sex induced euphoria and increasing it exponentially.'

Dr. Ahmad nodded when his subordinate expressed a solid understanding of what he was being told. They both walked together and were accompanied by a private security agent. The agent's a Cy who is dressed in a casual business suit that cuts off at the forearms. A sporty and catchy look that reminds me of what Rigoberto usually wears. It's possible that Dr. Ahmad works closely with Kazuki. A genius of his stature is definitely someone a CEO would keep close. I focus my sight on the elevator and then focus once again on the control panel. The panel becomes highlighted in red as I try to link with it. I open the Keller network's home page and then breach the source code. Hopefully, I can find a lead on the elevator's network. The amount of files that link to the source code of the homepage feels like it's beyond measure. This is where a filtering algorithm comes into play. I execute the same algorithm that I used on the I-drones back at the River Garden, but this time they're modified for the sake of finding the elevator's network. As soon as it's found, I narrow my search to elevators currently descending from the 185th floor. Got it! Now it's time to take a peek through its surveillance cameras. I've got a clear visual of Dr. Ahmad now and the elevator's surveillance camera is linked to the building's entire network. From this camera, I'll be able to get linked to each and every other one. In order to stay hidden, I'll have to abandon control of the S04. It wasn't a sentient Bot, so it's not going to question how it to the 185th floor. I'll have to make

haste though because it's going to resume the task of securing the rooftop. It's programmed been to follow a set of routines for the sake of the rooftops security. The S04's programming is scheduled to loop and repeat until noon. It should take that Bot 15 minutes to get back here. I don't know if I'd be able to slow it down or not. Maybe I could shut down an elevator? Something like that would arouse suspicion from the Bots and private security. D-00 could simply take out the S04 when it gets here, but that might be worse than the elevator idea. Moving on, I've continued following Dr. Ahmad and his subordinate down a hallway and I'm able to make out his conversation. He's still on the same subject it seems; and from what I gather, their conversation is reaching its conclusion.

'Kazuki is keeping a close eye on this project. The E_S03 is the future of this company. He and I both believe that this nanochip will turn the entire Keller Group into a megacorp.' Sounds like this nanochip is pretty groundbreaking. I'd definitely like to get a good look at this piece of hardware. After Dr. Ahmad and his subordinate parted ways, I switched to the next camera closest to him and continue to repeat that action as he makes way to his private lab. His lab is protected by a security code. The guard that was with him is standing outside. I could breach his mind, but if he doesn't have access to the lab, I'll have ended up wasting too much time. I decide to focus on accessing the lab instead of the guard. This is still gonna slow me down. 4 minutes have passed while following him and it's gonna take me another 4 to breach his private lab's surveillance network. After modifying my filtering algorithm again, I manage to find the lab's access key. I immediately switch to one of the cameras in his lab and witness a horrific sight. The preservation tanks filled with severed human organs were to be expected, but the most

terrible thing I had witnessed was the disassembled people being sustained by cables coming from the large consoles attached to the ceiling and the walls. For example, the severed head of a child about Heath's age. Maybe 12 years or less? That kid is crying his eyeballs out, begging loudly in his British accent to be brought back to normal.

'Please! Please mister! Please bring me back to my mommy and daddy!!! Please bring me back home to London!! Please!!!!'

This is really fucked up. The sick son of a bitch won't even let the kid die in peace. More wailing and screaming can be heard throughout the lab, making it really hard for me to concentrate. The woman who's only got a torso and head left, the man who's entire body is disassembled in the order of a row. His head, followed by his intestines, then his liver, testicles, leg, penis, and every other part of his body. What a monstrosity of a lab. Dr. Ahmad walks up to the child and activates a holo interface. He seems to be rearranging some code. As this takes place, that child starts to quiet down. I'm getting too caught up in this shit! I need to find Kazuki before that Bot gets back here!

'The E_S03 is stabilizing your mood little one.' Dr. Ahmad begins to walk up to his other specimen. Another interface manifests in front of the doctor. He's writing an observation report it seems. 2 minutes before that S04 gets back here! I decide to take a big risk and make an attempt to mind jack Dr. Ahmad. The lab's network is linked to his neuroware. This would be an easy hack, but his brain has a highly secure system. Several red windows begin to project throughout his lab.

'Is someone is trying to mind jack me?' Dr. Ahmad realizes what's happening, but remains calm. Mind jacking can be especially tricky when it comes to people. It takes knowing a thing or two about neural gene editing languages. My language

of choice Neu#. It's a language that makes it really easy to influence thought. Easier than others actually; I take back that last statement. With that being said, Dr. Ahmad has an extremely advanced security system in his neuroware. That system is called a Safeguard Neural Network or SNN for short. I have a customized version of the SNN myself, and it's compounded with other customized neural security systems installed.

'Whoever you are, you'll find that my SNN and strong brain will make it very hard for you to mind jack me. There are neural pathways established for circumstances like this.' Dr. Ahmad's right. A healthy, and well sustained brain can help assist in producing a strong neural output that can bolster a subjects resistance to mind jacking. The human brain is a tricky thing. We attach cybernetics to not only enhance it but to help us gain a better understanding of it as well as more control. The doctor's confidence in his neural security gives me ideas to work with. I wrote an algorithm in Neu# that will bolster his confidence upon execution. Countless subroutines that will make him blindly confident in himself. Dr. Ahmad will become foolhardy and less attentive, thus allowing me to breach his memory without notice. His SNN will interfere, but I've managed to set up a countermeasure for that. A simple decoy program to throw it off. It'll only last 50 seconds though. I look over at one of the windows of the security feed shown in my HUD. The S04 Bot is almost here. Right at the stairway leading to the rooftop! 40 seconds left! Folders upon folders are popping up in front of me. I've managed to filter out any memory file that has no relevance to Kazuki. Fuck it, I'll just copy all of this data and save it onto my own memory unit. 30 seconds left! The copying is gonna take 15 seconds, so I'll be good in regards to the SNN realizing it's fallen for a decoy program. It thinks that it's blocking me from

breaching the doctor's memory unit. D-00 draws the mono blades, ready for the S04. It walks up to the wall, waiting for the Bot to come through the door. Copying is finished!! Awesome! I relieve D-00 and take over. Then I withdraw my blades and mind jack the S04 again. My position has been compromised, but at least I have some actual data to work with now. I can sift through it later. Right now, I need to focus on getting the hell out of here. The Keller building's alarm goes off and from the surveillance, I get a clear view of Keller's private security mobilizing to engage. The S04's are doing the same thing too. They're all coming for me and have no idea what they're going up against. I upload a virus into the surveillance network. It's a learning program that I developed for occasions like this one(I also modified it for the circumstance at hand). It starts by cutting access to the surveillance network from as many nodes as it can reach. It then branches out to other networks. The `_cont_` virus as I call it is designed to seize control of as many subnetworks within the main network as possible. I get a good laugh out of what happens next. The S04 Bots have aimed their guns at Keller security and open fire. The `_cont_` virus, (cont being short for control) reaches the subnetwork that the S04s are controlled from.

Executive access to the elevator has been cut off and made exclusive for my own use. I unfolded my 84 and have it at the ready. The Keller building is only 215 stories high. It won't take as long to get to ground level as it would with the River Garden Complex. I still have that live feed of surveillance being broadcast in my HUD. 45 minutes of time has elapsed since I arrived at this building. I managed to sift through some of the data I had copied from Dr. Ahmad. There's 1.5 TB of data to

look through. So many written reports to read. A lot of it is relevant to his current project, which is good to have, but not what I need right now. Right now, I need to know where to find Kazuki. This building over here is just a side hustle for him. 90 percent of his business is in the black market. The monstrosities which I had witnessed in Dr. Ahmad's lab were only a tip of the iceberg. Moving on, I've been on the lookout. There's two teams of Keller security waiting for my arrival. I could jack one of them but not all, and I don't think there's enough time for the one that I could jack either. They got smart and vacated the premises of all Bots, so there aren't any So4's to jack and turn against them. The ground-level lobby is large, and they've set up cover everywhere. I don't have the tactical advantage here. My back is still in pain too. Looks like I'll have to go in guns blazing, so I hug the wall to the left of the elevator door as it opens upon arrival. Keller security is on guard, waiting for me to make my move. There are 16 of them in total. Security has itself positioned behind the pillars to the left and right of the lobby. Then there are others who have taken cover behind titanium-plated wall mounts that they put up. I can't remain in this elevator.

'Activating thermal visual spectrum!' That voice was within close proximity. They're making their move.

'He's hiding at his left hand side of the elevator!'

'Copy that!'

'Throwing a flashbang!'

'Shit! That's not good!' That very same flashbang rolls to the end of the elevator. There are 10 feet of distance between me and it. A blinding flash is caused by the explosion of the grenade. It has left me feeling dazed and disoriented. I hit the control panel in an attempt to close the elevator, but the door's

not responding! My vision is really blurred, and I can't see a damn thing clearly enough. I can't hear a thing either. That being said, I somehow manage to make out the security agent rushing in. She fires her rifle at me, but I grab it instantly and then I grab her by the neck. After that I get behind and put the bitch in a headlock.

'Hold... Yo.. Ire!!!!' That voice sounds so muffled. It keeps shouting the same phrase repetitively. I think they're saying 'Hold your fire.' Makes sense since I've got this agent with me now. A Human shield is my only means of protection for the moment. I take a side step to the right, use this agent as a shield, and fire 3 blind shots with my 84. My vision and hearing have begun to clear up a bit, but its still hard to make heads or tails of anything. I'm mostly relying on nerv.1.01 nervous system. In situations like this, high sensory input shines the most. Especially when it comes to the sense of touch. The voices of the other agents still sound so muffled. The woman that I have locked in my arms is starting to break free, so I let go and kick her in her lower back. As soon as she falls over I fire 2 shots at her then jump back to cover. I'm not sure, but I think I landed those shots on the right shoulder blade. Unless that armor has some form of electromagnetic resistance, there's no way that those two shots didn't penetrate. I take a peek at the floor and see that she's turned sideways and is opening fire at me. To avoid being shot, I lean back immediately. Damn, she's still alive. Is her armor resistant after all? A painful sensation begins to manifest in my abdominal area. It was the shot she landed when she rushed in. My combat vest prevented any penetration from taking place because it stopped the bullet dead in it's track. The bullet fell off and rolled to the other end. It feels as if I'd been punched really hard, but it's better than a bullet going through.

‘Throwing another flash bang!!’

Damn! Not again! I activate my thermoptic visual spectrum this time instead of relying on the surveillance feed. I’d have used LIDAR instead, but it’s too demanding. I’d end up fainting from the high need for nutrition after it’s used. The moment I do, this big explosion comes from the front entrance. This leaves the Keller security team in a state of confusion as I had been as several EMP and flashbangs are tossed at them. Most of them are rendered immobile and blinded.

‘Hands in the air!! This is the SCTF and SWAT!!’ That voice sounds awfully familiar. SWAT starts to barge in and the agents who managed to avoid getting stunned opens fire on them. Two SCTF operatives fall in to back up the SWAT team that’s been fired upon. The faces of the two operatives are blurred, of course, so I get a quick glimpse in the standard vision instead. One is a blonde woman with her hair pulled back into a ponytail. The other one is rather surprising to see. It’s Hwang!! Him and that blonde woman with the ponytail are from unit 12. I actually saw the woman before I entered the River Garden. Her face was blurred out but I know its her. My HUD suddenly starts to ring. ‘He knows I’m here?!’ I answer the call.

‘Dias, I can see you. I just did an optical scan. I’d know that face anywhere, even if it’s a bit blurred by your heat signature.’

I chuckle a little bit. Its actually somewhat relieving to see him. ‘You’ve got me dead to rights Hwang.’

‘You stay put while me and the SWAT team clean house.’

‘Sure thing.’ I take his advice and give myself a chance to breathe. Boy, did I get lucky or what? Hwang ended the call. Following that, is nothing but the sound of gunfire and explosions. I managed to close the elevator so that I could kick back and let the SCTF and SWAT do their thing. My head rocks

back and leans against the wall. I let my body slide down to the floor so that I can sit and rest. Now I find my mind wandering a bit. Thinking of all the events that have transpired in the last 48 hours. It's the 7th of February right now. My thoughts continue to race on. So many different people and things are on my mind. Dre; that conniving little shit. I wonder what he's up to? I hope he gets what's coming to him. Then there's Quinn. Has Prometheus gotten to him? I'm sure Quinn must have figured it out by now. He must know that Prometheus is so close. As my thoughts race and shift endlessly, I get back to thinking of the present. Rigoberto said that the SCTF was cracking down on all of the crime syndicates of NYC. Is that why they're here? They shouldn't have started with the Keller Group's corporate building. Not much dirt on Kazuki over here. I guess they couldn't find a better way to go after them?

The noise of combat has subsided. I'm happy I didn't have to get too involved. I think I could've handled those 16 security agents, but not without sustaining heavy injury. What I did here was extremely reckless. If I'd been more patient, they would never have had such a huge advantage over me. Several more SWAT teams have entered the building and have made their way to the upper floors. Police heli carriers can be heard from where I'm standing. Hwang's partner Renata is delegating orders to SWAT as he approaches me for conversation.

'Seems like I owe you another favor, Hwang. I'll admit that it was a relief to see you come through like that.'

'I wish I could say the same to you, Dias.' Hwang says in a solemn manner. 'Dias, I'm not here to speak to you on friendly terms as usual.'

'Lemme guess, I'm a suspect or an accessory to the crime?'

Come on Hwang, I know you could overlook this one. You know I'm a Cyber Stalker, infiltration is what I do. I didn't kill anyone here, nor did I commit any crimes. I breached some databases yeah, but the Keller Group is a criminal organization. Their corporate operation's no different.'

'I agree.'

'Well? What's the problem?'

'Rigoberto Sanchez. Your one and only best friend.'

I don't give a reply to Hwang right away. It's as if a cat caught my tongue. With the SCTF moving in on the Sanchez family as hard as they've been, a guy like me would be an integral lead on Rigoberto. It's a good thing that he doesn't know about my life as Kenji.

'Your silence says it all Dias. I have to take you in.' Hwang points his rifle at me, as well as the 3 SWAT officers that approach from behind.

'You got our man?' Renata walks over with her right hand ready to pull out her holstered pistol.

'I got em.' Hwang looks back at me after answering Renata. 'If you make any funny moves Dias, I'll shoot your legs off and if you still persist; I'll shoot your arms off next. We don't need you in one piece to make you talk. In reality, all we need is your brain.' The rifle he's got pointed at me is a semi-auto plasma 20 gauge Winchester SP9 shotgun. Hwang's definitely not exaggerating his firepower. 'Oh, and uh..' Hwang starts to smile halfway. 'Don't bother trying to mind jack anyone or disconnect from your body to escape. We've shut down the megaservers in this part of town. You won't get a Net Space connection for miles.' As soon as Hwang said that, two of the SWAT officers grab me and connect EMP cuffs around my wrists. An electromagnetic frequency surges through my central nervous system and gets

all the way up to my brain; shutting down my neuraware's core functionalities. Under a circumstance like this, I'm almost completely defenseless.

//Porn_Sex_Cybernetics

'1:15 am 02/07/2204 was the time and date of the arrest of Dias Velez, who has a close friendship with Rigoberto Sanchez of the Sanchez Crime Family. We managed to detain him after putting down the resistance brought forth by the private security at the Keller Group's corporate building. SWAT is still engaged in combat at the Keller building. It seems the enemy has bunkered up and prepared themselves for a full-scale battle. Send in 2 dozen TMK-0012 Bots. With that many, we'll be able to clean house for sure.' Hwang says to a holo projection of what appears to be the captain of his unit.

I'm sitting in the back of a police car with the EMP cuffs still tied to my wrists. There are over 20 armored vehicles barricading the street. Armed air crafts are hovering in the air, and I'd say there are roughly 60 SWAT officers within sight alone. How the hell am I gonna get myself out of this one?

'2 dozen isn't overkilling at all captain. They've got just as many S04 security Bots as they have security agents. An entire battalion is at their disposal.' So this is how Hwang gets when he's on the job? I'm surprised. I didn't think he had such a

serious side to him.

‘Look, I’m going to send the suspect your way immediately. Renata and two SWAT teams will be the ones to transport him. I’m gonna stick around and settle things here.’ Two teams just to make sure that I don’t escape. Hwang’s not taking any risks.

‘Yes captain, I understand. I really do. I’m confident that I’ll find leads to Rigoberto in the Keller Group’s database. There’s some transaction history between him and the company.’ Hwang gets silent. It seems like SCTF operatives are the only ones able to hear the captain’s words. A good precaution to secure data. Nobody will be able to pick up the captain’s voice, and the face of his holo is pixelated. Renata is at the driver’s seat of the vehicle I’m in, listening attentively to the conversation.

‘Rigoberto and his PMOs managed to put down a lot of our police officers. They’re highly skilled sir. When I encounter him again, I’ll need at least 5 of those TMK-0012’s to stay with me after I’m done here. SWAT won’t be enough.’ Rigoberto and Hwang went toe to toe with each other? Well, I’ll be damned. Hwang and his captain ended their call. He walks over to Renata.

‘Am I good to go Hwang?’ After saying that, he turns his gaze upon me and then waves at his subordinates. Two more police officers get inside the car. One that’s sitting to my right with a rifle aimed at me, and the other is sitting in the passenger seat next to Renata.

‘Yeah. You’re good to go.’ Renata starts to drive off with the rest of her SWAT convoy. I guess they’re gonna bring me straight to the precinct, but I decide to annoy them and ask anyway.

‘Hey! Where the hell you taking me?’

‘Shut up.’ The cop to my right says as he nudges me with his rifle.

‘I’m not talking to you asshole.’

‘What’d you call me?’

‘We’re bringing you in for interrogation.’ Renata intervened. Thought she’d give me the silent treatment.

‘Really?’

‘You’re an accessory to the crimes Rigoberto has committed. Guilty by association.’ Renata says as she stops at a red light. Even at this hour, traffic is extremely dense.

‘Hey, I didn’t know about Rigoberto’s crime spree!’

‘Lie about it all you want, but we have proof that you’ve even been a partner of his at one point in your life.’ Renata proceeds to play an audio.

‘What the hell is this?’ I hear Rigoberto’s voice, then I hear mine.

‘That’s from when he picked you up a few hours ago. We managed to plant a transmitter on that pathetic excuse of an air carrier of his in the middle of combat.’ The traffic light turned green and Renata resumed driving. Sweat starts to trickle down my forehead as I realize how screwed I am. Guilty by association. That’s just bullshit if you ask me. ‘He would have noticed if he had used a more recent model instead of a relic with such poor surveillance capacity.’ I can’t think of any more slick remarks or comments to say, except that I’ve told Rigoberto countless times to swap that shitty H-Cruiser with a better quality carrier. When I told Hwang he had me dead to rights, I didn’t mean this. My back is beginning to ache as it did a few hours ago. Without the pain stabilization program in effect(or the energy for it), it’s become excruciating. We hit another red light which seemed to annoy Renata. Then out of nowhere, a loud thumping noise comes from the ceiling of the vehicle. I’m completely bewildered by the noise and the denting that nearly hit my head.

‘I’ll go check that out!’ The cop to my right steps out of the

vehicle and gets grabbed by this robotic arm from above.

‘We’re under attack!!’

One of the officers from the other two vehicles in Renata’s convoy exclaims from a distance. Blood starts dripping and falling from the roof of the car. Then it began to spray everywhere. The blood had completely covered the 3-foot radius of space around us. It rained like a tropical storm. For most people, this would be a rather horrific sight. It’s not new to me though. Intense bloodshed like this doesn’t really shake me up. I’ve been the one to dish it out in the past. Just like I did when I sliced off the upper skull of Johann Strauss. The image of his corpse burns brightly in my mind’s eye. I can still recall the expression of fear and frustration on his face. The one that remained on his face, even after his death.

‘Whatever it is, open fire!’ The two SWAT teams follow Renata’s command. The car starts shaking and bouncing from side to side. Civilians on the streets run for cover as they scream in terror and the ones who are in the middle of traffic duck. What the hell is going on? All of the cops are aiming in my direction as they fire. Interestingly enough, they are also under heavy fire themselves and are having trouble returning it to this mysterious enemy standing on top of the car I’m in. Renata jumps out of the vehicle and is accompanied by the cop in the passenger seat. The cop gets his head blown off immediately while Renata manages to take cover behind a neighboring van. Meanwhile, I’m sitting here contemplating over what to do! The gunfire coming from above gets even louder. I see large red projectiles fired at one of the SWAT vans in the convoy. A huge explosion takes place, injuring 2 cops in the process. The mysterious gunman or whatever jumps to the ground right in front of me as I decide to try and slip away. I get a real good look

and realize that this is not a Human; it's Bot! A large Bot! It turns to me and makes a fast and vertical swift swing with its left arm. I flinched, thinking that I was under attack, but was instead met with a pleasant surprise. Its arm is high in the air with a black mono blade sticking out and it's one red eye glowing in the darkness. I look at my hands and smile as I see the EMP cuffs snap and fall off my wrists. My neuraware instantly reactivates and it was the most gratifying feeling. The Bot then aims with the firearm protruding from its forearm. Its gray plating has proven to be very resistant to the ballistic plasma projectiles hitting it. The Bot looks at me with something to say.

'Dias, your gear's in the trunk.' I nod at Icarus and I don't waste a second grabbing my 84, then my Anderson along with the ammo clips and first aid.

'I owe you Icarus!' SWAT begins to open fire at me as well, but I'm no sitting duck. I leap several feet into the air and away from the cops; landing behind a taxi cab. Killing cops will get me into a lot of trouble, but fuck it. Icarus just saved my life. The SCTF would have executed me for sure after they were done. They're known for the ruthlessness and brutality. I unfold my 84 and strap it to my vest around the right shoulder. I line down the sight of my rifle and pull the trigger as soon as a cop's skull is in the crosshairs of the scope. Then I aim and shoot the officer next to him before the poor bastard realized what went through his buddy's skull. I used 5 out of 7 rounds back at the Keller building. The two shots fired were the last of my current clip. Renata comes at me from behind, firing from a distance. Realizing that my 84's magazine is empty, I quickly pull out my Anderson and open fire within half of a second. Renata hits the ground as her right knee liquifies into a bloody mist that splattered all over the truck behind her. She immediately drops as she screams in

pain. Her leg is severed from the knee down. It was an extremely precise shot.

‘Ah! Fuck!!!!’ I nod and laugh at her as she screams in pain.

‘Don’t worry honey, you’ll be able to get that fixed.’

‘Go to hell!!!’ Renata aims her sidearm, but I shoot it out of her hand with my 84

(which I swiftly reloaded as she dropped to the ground). I’ll kill a cop, but not an operative. The consequences are a hell of a lot bigger. Nobody really cares about cops anymore. They can be replaced by Bots. However, SCTF operatives are a very different case. These military operatives are not as expendable as the typical beat cop. A fortune is invested in each individual’s cybernetics. Not only that, but they’re all very tight nit. Strong bonds are formed between them because of their shared neural synapses. I don’t what kind of programming enables that. Each unit can share thoughts and emotions. Hwang once told me about this. I’ve also eavesdropped on his conversations whenever he is in the plaza. He’s only discussed it passively, but I gather that this tech is based on holo-link. It’s meant for tactical use. The formation of the emotional bonds between operatives was an unintended byproduct. Hwang’s unit isn’t going to be happy about what I did to Renata.

‘Consider that a courtesy. Accept your loss lady.’ I call for Icarus so that both of us can make a run for it. I sprint ahead to a dark alleyway across the street and leap over a 10-foot fence. Icarus follows me into the darkness as raging police sirens can be heard getting closer.

We both managed to ditch the NYPD, but it’s the SCTF that I’m worried about. Renata may not be dead, but her people are not going to make light of what I did to her. On top of that, there are

the Reavers. Johann's death came back to bite me in the ass just as I knew it would, all thanks to Dre. Icarus and I are currently hiding out in the sewers. It's dark, it's filthy, and it's vast. Every tunnel is almost half a mile in diameter. Icarus is on the lookout as I make a quick observation of the data that I stole from Dr. Ahmad, but I can't focus. Not here; this place reeks and I wanna get out before catching its scent.

'This leads to an exit that leaves us at the heart of the Red Light District.'

'I know Icarus. I checked the sewers surveillance network myself.'

'I see.' Icarus' red-eye dims and then brightens again.

'You weren't so talkative when we first met.'

'We were engaged in close range combat.' His voice is deep, somewhat robotic, but also very calm and confident. Somewhat Humane as well.

'But things didn't have to get that far. I cut off your arms and your head.'

'I'm aware.'

'If you said something, I'd have stopped. We could've talked things out.'

'Professor Quinn had ordered me to attack you.'

'You're a sentient Bot, right? You didn't have to follow his orders. Now if you did it out of a sense of loyalty-' I cut myself off hoping to hear what Icarus will reply with.

'Loyalty? I do not understand.'

'Loyalty Icarus!' My voice echoed throughout the sewers. 'It's not complicated. Loyalty is something that's demonstrated when people do things to help each other. It's the opposite of betrayal. The opposite of screwing people over. It's what makes people friends as opposed to enemies.' I thought of that piece

of shit Dre as I explained the opposite of loyalty to Icarus. The frustration in my voice must have been obvious.

‘I see.’

‘You’re almost like a newborn baby.’

‘A newborn baby? Interesting.’

‘Don’t tell me that-’ I pause my sentence for a second. ‘You were just given sentience?’

‘That depends on how one defines sentience. If it is the ability to choose right from wrong, then yes. My __limb_sys__ function allows me to learn the difference between the two from personal experience as well as the subroutines that were written into its algorithms. Or if sentience means the ability to think logically, the same answer would be yes as well. My __neo_sys__ function simulates the experience of an organic neocortex but at a much higher capacity.’

‘Holy shit!’

‘Holy shit? I don’t get it. Let me search the meaning of that phrase.’ Icarus does a Net search while I process millions of thoughts before I can say anything.

‘Icarus. Do you know what you are?’ He’s ignoring me.

‘*Holy shit*. A phrase commonly used to express feelings of surprise or shock. It is considered by society to be a vulgar expression.’

‘Icarus!’

‘Yes, Dias?’

‘You’re a copy of Prometheus!’

‘A copy?’

‘Yeah! Did Quinn explain that to you!? The subroutines you described are his. I’ve seen the algorithms myself.’

‘I’m made from the same functions, yes. I wouldn’t necessarily say that I’m a copy. I’m more like his brother, or perhaps

his cousin?’ After the echoes of our voices stop, Icarus points forward. ‘Look, a ladder. That’s the exit for sure.’

‘How is your brain able to run such programming? It’s obviously a farmed brain like mine. However, biotech can only take you so far, so it must be your neuraware. Even so, it would have to be some seriously advanced shit man. Do you have a miniature megaserver for neuraware?’ I said in a joking manner. That’s the only hardware that could run Prometheus’ algorithms.

‘I do not have any added neuraware. It is just my brain.’

‘Your brain? Wait. Just that? A fully organic brain? Bullshit.’

‘Yes and no. My brain was not *farmed* as you say. To be more specific, it is a hyper brain that was engineered through the use of foglet technology. Like cells, the foglets reproduce via the process of mitosis, but at a much greater capacity. They can be manipulated from a terminal. Foglets do exactly as they are programmed. Unlike human biology, it is a hard science. Not soft. Foglet tissue lacks the undefined variables that an organism is composed of. The professor had shown this to you before, but it was only a very small sample. He showed you how foglets can keep cells alive. How they can be utilized for healthcare. What he did not show you was how well they can replicate the functions of cells and outperform them. The same applies to other forms of matter as well. Not just organic lifeforms. Professor Quinn passed on all of his research to me. That being said, my hyper brain not only outperforms the human brain and any neuraware added to it but also applies the complex functions of quantum computing often found in megaservers. The appearance of my brain is very ordinary. You wouldn’t suspect any of the things I’ve said unless you’re behind a microscope.’

‘I see. The average Bot has a brain that’s either farmed and hooked up with a shit load of neuraware. Or, it’s recycled from a corpse or pulled from the original body; and hooked up with a shit load of neuraware.’

‘Neuraware is a hallmark achievement when it comes to the cybernetic enhancement of the human brain. This technology is what erased the line between man and machine.’

‘You’re the next step in that case. I’d say it’s safe to say that.’

‘Perhaps. Perhaps Professor Quinn would agree with that statement? I’m still finding ways to define myself.’

‘You said Quinn passed on all of his research to you. Why would he do that? Did something happen?’

‘Professor Quinn committed suicide.’ A gut-wrenching feeling overtook me after hearing that.

‘I came looking for you because there isn’t anyone else with who I am on a first-name basis. I couldn’t think of another way to carry on.’

‘I’m glad you found me when you did Icarus.’ I try not to think about Quinn since I need to focus on the job. I feel bad for the guy. He was brilliant. Brilliance like that should never go to waste. ‘Let’s get back to the surface.’ Icarus and I take turns climbing the ladder. We both emerge from the sewers and end up in another alleyway. It’s your typical urban layout. A somewhat narrow space littered with a lot of trash. The only people who are occupying this space are restaurant workers unloading commissary, and then there are a few homeless people who’ve made homes out of dumpsters and paper bags. It’s the start of the 23rd century, and yet New York still doesn’t have a clear solution for homelessness.

‘Hey, Icarus. Why did Quinn kill himself? Did he give a reason?’

‘There were several reasons from what I could tell. Guilt was one of the main reasons.’

‘What were the others?’

‘They’re more complex and difficult for me to explain because they were so vague. He said that with me in the picture, his work is complete. Professor Quinn believed that his existence was obsolete. I do not understand how my existence rendered the obsolescence of his. Perhaps I took up too much space in his apartment? He would say things that were beyond my comprehension, even after looking up the phrases or sentences he’d use to express himself. One of the last things he told me was to not fly too close to the sun, which made absolutely no sense since I was not designed with any flight capability-’

‘I get it Icarus!’ If I hadn’t interrupted him he would have gone on for hours. ‘Look, we’ve made it to our destination.’

‘You mean your destination.’

‘Yeah, that’s what I meant.’ I take in the view of the central market of the Red Light District. It’s bright and colorful like a concert or a show. Music is playing everywhere, people from all backgrounds travel here to have a great time. Pornographic holos are projected all across the air as far as the eye can see. Sex workers are barely dressed; like the women wearing nothing but leather thongs and bras, or the men only wearing tights exposing their buttocks. Everyone in this profession uses a combination of cutting edge cybernetic and genetic enhancements to improve their looks. In a place like this, you’ll find some of the most beautiful and attractive Human beings on the face of the earth. Las Vegas used to have bragging rights for that, but after the Climate Damage, they could no longer continue being the famous sin city. Unfortunately for them, there wasn’t a skyplate offering protection.

‘Hey Icarus, do you have a sexual preference?’

‘I do not understand.’ I think he got a bit flustered.

‘Do you like men or women?’

‘I’ve never taken my sexual preference into consideration.’

‘This is a good place to start. We can set you up with a new body. One your brain can hookup to. You’ll have genitalia that you could work with if you switch to a more Human body. Do you see yourself as a man or a woman? With a name like Icarus, I’d say you’re a man. But that’s up to you, not me.’

Icarus pauses for a minute. His red eye becomes dim, then lights up again. ‘Man.’

‘And your sexual preference? Come on, you’ve gotta have one.’ I say mischievously.

‘Men and women. It seems unfair to prefer one and then discriminate the other.’

‘When it comes to sexual preference, it’s perfectly fine to discriminate Icarus. For example; I like athletic women with really good curves.’

‘Like the sex workers walking around the street?’

‘Exactly!’ Both of us walk into the middle of the street and get mixed into the crowd. The street itself is blockaded due to being put to use for sex work.

‘That’s rather shallow. What about men?’

‘That’s a good question. I used to be really into men, but not so much these days.’

‘Is it due to homophobia?’

‘No not that. I’ve lived a long life Icarus. My taste has changed. I still feel some attraction when I meet handsome men and all, but I haven’t been getting the same arousal that I used to. At least like I did in my previous life. I’m sure I’ll start to like men again. There was a time where it was vice versa. Maybe it’s my

current body's hormones?'

'I do not understand.'

'It's complicated, I know. Don't stress yourself over it.' We reach the curb and walk down a set of stairs leading to an abandoned subway station. 'Part of being sentient Icarus is knowing that not everything in the universe is meant for you to understand.' Icarus became silent after I said that to him. I'll bet he's doing some bullshit search to get an understanding of what I told him. Such is the nature of AIs with newfound sentience I suppose.

'Dias, where are we going?'

'I'm about to do some work. There's a lead on a gangster named Kazuki Keller that I'm trying to track down. I need to find a way to get to him. Apparently where I'm about to visit is a place he frequents.'

'So you're following a lead?'

'Yes, that's right. That's what I just said.' I walk ahead of Icarus down the platform and into the tunnel. It's no different than the central market was. The same type of holos is everywhere. There's a higher concentration of sex workers though. Adult actors and actresses whose performances I've experienced many times in simulated Spaces; along with several business magnates in the porn or prostitution industry. All of the sex workers here walk around with even less clothing than the ones on the surface. One really attractive lady walks past me and winks. She had medium-length blue hair, a caramel skin tone, and bright amber-colored eyes. An obvious Cy, but her cybernetics were not very invasive. The crevices on her skin were barely noticeable. This woman also had an incredibly sexy outfit. Tiny dark denim shorts revealing her legs. A white v-neck cutting off at her belly and a dark grey leather jacket that

she wore over it.

‘I think that woman was attracted to you, Dias.’ My grin widened after Icarus told me that.

‘You think so?’ Further down the tunnel lies another market. The tunnel itself had undergone some reconstruction for the sake of accommodating the market. Walls were tore down and large spaces were built for the people who wanted to open shop in them. I take a right and walk into an HET spot called Marco’s Clinic. It’s illegal of course. Kazuki trusts this spot. He owns a piece of it since he was one of its main investors.

‘Welcome!’ A guy with a lot of enthusiasm greets us. He looks like he’s about my age. Same height, pale skin, black bushy hair, and a clean shave. The guy is dressed in a long white lab coat covered in soot, much like Quinn was. I play along and pretend I’m doing some window shopping.

‘Hey! You must be Marco?’ I get really animated as I begin to speak. So does he. Must be expecting a sale from this.

‘Yes I am, and I’m glad to have you here. Always happy to have new guests.’

‘That’s awesome. I’ve heard a lot of great things about your work.’ I look over at the right wall and see naked bodies hanging from it. Men, and women. They’re all incomplete and in development. Some are rehashed Human corpses while others are rehashed scrap Bots, or Bots being built from scratch. They’re all in great shape and seem to be getting enhanced with optimization for sex appeal.

‘What brings you here today sir?’

‘Hmm.’ I continue my little act. ‘Icarus, what do you think of this body?’ I point at the corpse of a Human male. One that was in great shape with handsome looks and an excellent physique. The face isn’t too bad. A strong jawline with a peach fuzz of

facial hair, blue eyes and long blonde hair. Its the classical look of a generic 21st century pretty boy.

‘When you talked about getting me a new body, I did not imagine that it would be so soon.’ Icarus walks up to the body too and stands behind me. He quietly observed before making any further statements. ‘My current body is prioritized for urban combat situations. Judging by the appearance of this one, it is designed for sex.’

‘Actually, that body was designed for combat!’ Marco chimes in on the conversation. ‘It’s the corpse of a Navy SEAL. I reconstructed it for the sake of sex work and appeal, but it still maintained most of it’s military cybernetics. It’s old. Late 21st century, but it’s still one hell of a body. I made sure to update it from time to time.’

I turn to Icarus and continue my little act unbeknownst to him. ‘What do you say Icarus?’

‘I think I’ll go with it.’

‘This is the part where you say thanks.’

‘Thank you, Dias.’

Marco steps up to the body and interacts with it. ‘That’ll be 202,340 in Creds, or 52,560 in V-coin. We have financing options if you’re interested.’ There are only 2 other guests in this shop besides use. I’d wait for them to leave but I’m in a rush.

‘I was thinking of a really good deal, Marco.’ I put my hand behind my back and grip my Anderson by the hilt. Marco looks a bit perplexed by my statement. ‘I was thinking you give it to me.’

‘Just give it to you? You mean for free?’

‘Well, not exactly like that. More like a trade.’

‘I’m sorry sir, only Cred or V-co-’ I grab Marco by the back of

his skull and bash it onto the nearby table.

'You give me that body, answer some questions, and you'll get to live another day. If you don't I turn your head into a and bloody ass mist that'll splatter all over this nice little table of yours.' The barrel of my pistol is shoved against his face. The other two guests look like they're about to intervene while I remain occupied with keeping Marco's head against the table.

'Fuck you!' I pistol whipped him for trying to get tough.

'Hey man! What the hell!?' One of the two guests decides to get heroic and walks over in some kind of attempt to stop me.

'Icarus, deal with him will you?' As soon as I said that, Icarus hits the guy with a forward kick; launching him into the air and crashing into the other table across from the one I'm occupying with Marco's face. I point my gun at the other guy afterward. 'You wanna try and be a hero too?'

'No way man, I was just here for upgrades!!' He puts his hands up and then runs out the door.

'Make sure nobody else walks in Icarus. Me and Marco are gonna have a one on one conversation.' I shove my gun against his face again. 'I wanna know about your partner.'

'My partner!?'

'Don't play dumb. He's the only partner you have.'

'You mean Kazuki!?'

'Tell me where to find him. I swear if you don't-'

'He's one of the investors in this clinic, that's all there is to him! I swear!!'

I pistol whip Marco and then throw him to the floor. He starts crawling backward as my Anderson remains aimed at him. 'I'm sure you know what kind of gun this is. What it could do to you.'

'You must have a death wish. You're insane, you know that!?' I shoot his left arm off as soon he gets back on his feet. A bloody

mist spreads across the air due to the matter of his joint phase shifting to liquid form. Marco looks down and sees his severed forearm falling to the floor. After realizing what had happened, he begins to scream and cry.

‘Mother fucker!!!! You asshole!!!! You blew my arm off!!!!’

‘Your head’s next if you don’t talk. Don’t think of disconnecting from your body either. I already took over your network.’

Marco starts to gain control of his breathing as he gets ready to talk. Icarus remains on the lookout at the entrance to prevent further interference.

‘Kazuki Keller. He’s an investor in this clinic. He used to get cybernetics from here on a regular. You won’t find him at the Keller building. A lot of people seem to think that’s an important part of his business. Especially that foolishly arrogant Dr. Ahmad, but it’s just a tiny piece. A front to throw people off.’ I walk up to Marco and hit his face with a left hook.

‘You’re telling me a bunch of crap that I already know. I need to find out where he is. Like his apartment. Or the next time he’ll be here.’

‘Why the fuck are you so hell bent on finding him!?’ I smack him with my gun again. He’s stubborn.

‘Talk.’

‘Okay, okay. He’s got a penthouse on the corner of Bleecker and 3rd. It’s not far from here.’

‘What’s the street address?’

‘230 Bleecker. It’s not where he lives, but it’s a building he owns.’

I recognized the building after doing a quick Net search. ‘I know that building. The Aphrodite Hotel. I didn’t know he owned it though.’

‘He just acquired it last Friday. The news hasn’t gone public

yet.’ The Aphrodite Hotel is something of a landmark for the Red Light District. Hailed as a sexual haven, many workers in the industry do business there. With the little time that I had earlier, I looked through Dr. Ahmad’s data, but nothing regarding the Aphrodite Hotel came up. If what Marco says is true, it would be beneficial to check there. A wealthy gangster who seems to be trying to build a legitimate business would spend most of their time at a place they most recently invested in.

‘Kazuki comes here regularly. That’s something I happen to know. Something you just said yourself.’

‘He **used** to come here regularly. I haven’t seen him since I first opened this clinic.’

‘You better not be lying to me.’ I turn to Icarus and holster my Anderson. ‘Let’s go.’

‘What about my new body?’

‘Oh yeah, that’s right. Go grab it. We’ll transfer your brain after finding a place to stay.’

Marco starts to curse and whine as Icarus removes the body from the wall.

‘Be glad that I decided to let you live Marco.’

We’re back at the sex market of 4th street. Icarus is standing around like a statue while holding the body we just acquired. I’m walking in between vendor tents and looking at different clothing shops to see what I can get for his new body. Most of these clothes are adult-themed. I did find one shop with casual clothes. The vendor looks at me as I browse around.

‘Hey lady, how much for some underwear, a shirt, and jeans?’ The vendor is some old woman with a cat in her arms meowing at me. I walk up to the cat and pet it. After that, I noticed the cybernetic implants throughout its body. They were highly

sophisticated. This cat had better enhancements than the owner. This is certainly made clear by the fact that the owner still kept the appearance of an old woman. She lets it out of her grasp to run around her counter. 'Cute cat you have there.' She lit up a cigarette before speaking.

'Thanks. Buttercup has lived far beyond her lifespan.'

'I can see that. Have you augmented its intelligence? Given it a conscience?'

'No, I still wanted my cat to act like one. This cat was farmed from a variety of different tissue and then laced with a plethora of experimental tech throughout its life.'

'Interesting. If I had the time, I'd spend an hour or so to discuss this with you.'

'Cats are extinct you know. At least real ones are.'

'Hence *farming*, the complex process of manufacturing tissue.'

'Indeed. Even though cats are gone, their genes aren't. Sometimes, they're grown through more traditional means. Synthetic wombs are what I'm referring to. However, there are skilled enough scientists out there who grow all of that tissue separately. The organs, skeleton, and muscle fibers. All of it is put together with cybernetic implants. It's a more grotesque procedure; putting organs and tissue together like they're parts.'

'You know your stuff granny.'

'Getting too comfortable over here youngster. For all I know, you're probably twice my age. You traded your humanity for power. Hell, maybe you're not even human. Such a common thing these days. People like you and that friend of yours.'

'This is a very stimulating chat, but as I said earlier; I don't have the time. What's my charge?'

'40 Creds. I could add some combat gear if you like. It's not

the usual assortment I have here, so I'm trying to get rid of it. For another 120 Creds, it's all yours.'

'What made you figure that I was on the market for that?'

'The way you're dressed with that 84 strapped to your arm. That Bot friend of yours too. It looks like a military model. Only a moron wouldn't notice it.'

'Hmm, you're very observant.'

'Not really. I'm just not a moron.'

'Do you happen to have any firearms you're trying to get rid of too?'

'I don't, but they're not hard to find around here sweetie.' I extend my hand to her and open it to reveal my trans-plant.

'That's a shame. Guess I'll just settle for what you're offering.' She pulls out her trans-scanner and charges me. After having all of that gear bagged up, I thank her and walk back to Icarus. We both walk down the street and take in the sights again. The party never stops around here. If I weren't working, I'd take the time to enjoy myself. 'You see that giant truck over there?'

'Yes, what about it Dias?'

'I made a 24-hour reservation for one of its rooms. It's an old military truck that was converted into a motel. The rental was dirt cheap, so expect to see some crazy shit going down in there. Inexpensive rentals are always the weirdest.' The motel had a diameter of 200 feet with 8 rooms to spare. It was a mobile barracks for military use. It's definitely seen better days.

'The Den. A strange name.' Icarus starts to go on and on about what he's found in a quick lookup of the place. Prostitution, pimping, molestation, pedophilia, corpse fucking, and just about any other sex crime that you could think of. It's a shitty place, but great if you wanna hide. The thing about hotspots for sex crimes is that everyone minds their own business. The

moment we walked through the entrance of The Den, we could hear the various moans and screams all throughout the hallway. There was one room that Icarus and I passed that had very distinct noises coming from it. I quickly breach the surveillance system of the door(which wasn't really secure) and look into the room. What I witnessed was something that I could not unsee.

'Dias, is this our room?' I couldn't respond to Icarus because I was too disturbed with what I'd just laid eyes on. 'Dias, what's wrong?'

'They're gang fucking him.'

'Gang fucking? I do not understand.'

Knowing what to expect, but actually seeing it are two different things. I told Icarus to expect this, but here I am losing my mind. This kid must be 13, and he's getting raped by 4 buffed dudes. Who the hell could be into this?

'Gang fucking, also called gang banging or group sex. An act where one person engages in sexual activity with a group of people of the opposite gender. You said it was someone *getting* gang fucked. This implies that it's a woman since women do not have a penis which is required for penetration. Her partners must be men in that case.'

'You got most of it right Icarus, except for one thing.'

'What?'

'The victim is an innocent and unwilling 13-year-old boy.'

'Dias. You seem extremely frustrated. Is it because the boy is unwilling?'

'Yeah, he's just a Norm. They're using him to shoot a child porn scene.'

'If you're so upset Dias, why not step in and stop them? I can assist you.'

'Thanks, but-'

‘What they are doing is vile Dias. My `_limb_sys_` function is flaring right now; searching countless topics on the evils of child pornography and the entirety of it as a subgenre of the industry.’ After hearing a newborn sentient AI say this, I decided to take action. If he can see the immorality of the situation, then so should I.

‘I’m gonna do something that’s really hands-off.’

‘What do you have in mind?’ Icarus and I continue to walk into the room I reserved after the door picked up my access key and let me through.

‘I’ll mind jack them, and kill them. It’ll be a complete synaptic breakdown.’ I begin breaching all 4 of these sick bastards without them noticing. They have 3rd rate neuraware so it’s easy. Their security systems are of an extremely low quality, and they all have weak minds. It was nothing like Dr. Ahmad, who had the cutting edge SNN to protect his brain. After linking, I upload a virus that causes them to have seizures. It was the same one I used on the I-drones back at the River Garden Complex. The one that endlessly loops and issues over 5 million different instructions. The foam and saliva coming out of their mouths eventually turn into blood while brain fluid starts dripping from their nostrils. The boy gets away from the man who had him in his grasp. A sense of relief could be seen in his expression as he covers himself with a blanket and watches these 4 bastards die.

‘Nice work Dias.’ Icarus had breached the surveillance system to watch it happen.

‘Yeah.’ I don’t really feel like I made much of a difference. There are millions of more kids out there in the same situation. Every time I save one, I feel the urge to help 10 more. Then 20 more emerge from nowhere, and then it never stops. I’m not cut out for heroics. My life as Kenji Albom proved that.

'Lets get started on your brain transfer Icarus.' Icarus places the body on the mattress next to him and sits close by on the floor.

'I'm ready when you are Dias.' His voice choked up a bit.

'Are you afraid?'

'Afraid? Me?'

'Yeah, your voice is choking up. That's fear.'

'I see. So this is what fear feels like. I experienced a similar sensation when Professor Quinn took his own life.' Icarus grew silent and then spoke again as he looked at his new body. 'There were many more emotions that I experienced as well. Emotions that I couldn't identify. Have you ever gone through that?'

I look at Icarus and then I look up at the ceiling. For some reason, that question made me reflect on a lot of things. I break my train of thought and nod at him. 'Happens to all of us at one point or another. That's why I rely on certain algorithms to prevent me from feeling those emotions. I can send them to you sometime. Not that you'd have a hard time coming up with a few by yourself.'

'Thank you Dias.'

'I get it man. The fear. Being human is a painful and demanding experience. Technology has made it easier to deal with.'

'Have you experienced this before? A brain transfer? I imagine you have. You said you had a past life. Was that before a brain transfer?' Icarus begins to grow nervous as he asks the same questions repeatedly.

'Stop being so damned afraid will you? I know exactly what I'm doing.'

'You've done brain transfers?' His fear becomes more apparent, and annoying too.

‘Many times.’ I connect my jack to the port behind his head so that I could manually mind jack him. The process is extremely easy since he dropped his guard and trusts me. I initiate a shut down of his consciousness and take a look at his programming. It’s exactly like what I saw in Prometheus’ profile, but without the Logan algorithm. It seems that Quinn didn’t want to include that in Icarus’ neural network. I open his skull and take a look at this hyper brain of his. It causes me to think back on what Prometheus had said earlier. That thing about needing a vessel. Icarus has what he wants. A ‘hyper’ brain with the same processing power as a megaserver. How did Quinn accomplish that? His lab hardly looked like it was conducive enough for that level of work. I didn’t see any 3D printing hardware advanced enough to produce utility fog. Would 3D printing even be the method for creating this? Maybe the limbs in that huge preservation tank had something to do with that? They were engineered with utility fog. Maybe I’ll ask Icarus when I finish the transfer. It would be rude and invasive to just browse his brain’s data. I walk over to his new body and sit it upright. Then I hit the switches behind its head. There’s nothing but central nerve connectors (or CNCs) inside; meaning it’s literally brainless. The CNCs are the wires within the skull of a Cy that connect the brain to the central nervous system. There are hundreds of wires that I have to work with and connect to his hyper brain which I currently hold in my left palm. It’ll take a while to connect them all, but at least the amount of CNCs are equal to the number of ports on his hyper brain. Furthermore, I happen to enjoy this kind of work.

Icarus seems to like his new body, almost like a kid in a candy store. ‘How’s it feel?’ I sit in the bed across from his with a

smile on my face and a bottle of beer in my hand.

‘I’m feeling a great sense of joy.’

‘It took me 50 minutes to get that done. You’d better be feeling joy.’

Icarus looks at his hands in awe. ‘We arrived in this room at 2:05 and you managed to complete a full transfer of my brain in such a short passage of time? That is very impressive. Very much like Professor Quinn’s level of skill and craftiness. How did you become so skilled?’

‘It comes with the territory of being a Cyber Stalker. We have to be self-sufficient in every way possible.’ I finish my beer and toss it in the nearby trash. The crashing sound of glass colliding with each other was irritating. Then I reach for my firearms and ammo. Despite all the combat that I went through in a 5-hour time frame, I’m still good on ammo. I’ve got three 7 round clips left for my 84 and two 15 round clips left for my Anderson. With the right strategy, and well placed shots; there is never a need for worry. That encounter with Keller security was reckless. I’ll be even more cautious this time. I hope.

‘Icarus, I’m gonna get back to work. You stick around here okay? There’s a lot to do if you get bored. I’ve sent you 5000 Creds and 3000 V-coin.’

‘Thank you, Dias.’

‘That’s a lot of money. If I were you, I’d go find some company to enjoy it with.’

‘Company? Are you referring to a sexual partner?’

I clasp my head and laugh. He’s such a child.

‘Dude, just go get your God damn cherry popped.’

‘My cherry? Is this some other Human expression?’

I clasp my head again and laugh even harder. He’s definitely going to look it up.

//Welcome_To_The_Aphrodite_Hotel

‘Howard, what a delight it is to hear your voice!’ I respond to his call with sarcasm.

‘I want a status report. Where are you? What are you doing?’

‘I’m tracking Kazuki Keller.’

‘That would mean you’re in the Red Light District.’

‘Wow! I’m talking with a genius! How did you know?’ My sarcasm continues. Howard shrugs me off as he continues to talk.

‘You’ve been making a lot of noise lately. Be on your toes.’

‘You’re worried about me?’

‘The chaos that transpired at the River Garden Complex, and then the conflict with the SCTF. All of that happened in a very short time frame. It shows that you like to work fast. As a result, you’ve become a big target.’ I run out of sarcastic remarks to reply with and let him continue. ‘It seems Rigoberto was right about you. Other Cyber Stalkers like to take their sweet time with meaningless observations. They spend weeks long before they move in on their objectives, but I need fast results. Good or bad.’ He’s not wrong about that. My methods are rather unorthodox

for my kind. When working, I follow the same observational process for sure, but I always seize any opportunity to arise and I strike when the iron is hot. Otherwise, time gets wasted. I call it: Aggressive Observation.

‘I take it you’ve already met Quinn.’

‘Yeah, I did. It wasn’t easy getting to him, but I found a way. I also met Prometheus too. He was communicating through a proxy disguised as a Reaver.’

‘Prometheus spoke to you?’

‘Yeah, he did.’

‘As himself? Not under any of his aliases? He did not introduce himself as Sinn? Or Alec Ackerman?’

‘That’s right.’

‘That’s not like him.’

‘I know, it sort of came from left field. I thought he’d try to mind jack me rather than taking the time to talk. He kept telling me how illogical I was, but made a rather illogical decision by revealing himself to me.’

‘Interesting.’

‘Quinn told me that he was the first person Prometheus visited after breaking free from Gamble’s network.’

‘I’m assuming that he wanted all of Quinn’s research data. The data regarding the development of foglets. I’m sure you were made aware of this.’

I didn’t reply to his remark. To be honest, I had no intention of telling him anything about what Quinn has managed to develop with the utility fog. I definitely have no intention of telling him about Icarus either.

‘Quinn originally began his research with Gamble. Huge investments were put into his work, only to see him disappear with all of the files.’

‘He explained the general concept of his work to me but never revealed any actual data. All I got to see were the cybernetic organs he kept hanging from the ceiling. He expressed a lot of hatred for Gamble and the UCA, and he didn’t trust me much. In fact, Quinn sent this 7-foot Bot to attack me. Fortunately, I was able to put it down.’

‘Seems like he managed to put that very same Bot back together. It nearly slaughtered an entire team of PMO’s I had sent to investigate his apartment.’

‘You sent a team of Private Military Operatives?’

‘Yes, it was the moment I learned of the huge ruckus you had caused at the River Garden Complex. I needed to make sure that you were alive and well. When I heard about what had transpired at the Keller building, I learned that sending PMOs was in vain because I knew that it was the result of your search for Kazuki. Moving on, That 7-foot Bot killed 6 of them. They were a unit of 8 PMOs. After that encounter, that Bot went on a killing spree as it made an escape from the River Garden.’

‘That sounds nothing like the Bot I encountered. Did it have grey armor plating?’

‘Yes, it did. The two surviving PMOs found Quinn’s lab in ruin. All of his hard drives were destroyed, and his corpse was laying on the floor with his throat cut open. It’s very likely that this 7-foot Bot became one of Prometheus’ proxies. He killed Quinn and took all of his research. I’m sure of it.’ After Howard explained that to me I let out a quiet sigh of relief. I don’t want megacorporations getting their hands on Icarus or his brain. It became clear to me that Quinn wanted to rectify the mistakes he had made in Prometheus’ conception. Icarus was a means of redemption.

‘Before I left the River Garden Complex, Quinn told me that

Prometheus had taken over Uganda's megaservers and their orbital elevator.'

'Impossible, the UCA would've picked up on that by now.'

'Not if they're already preoccupied in their own backyard. I've been doing some thinking Howard. Prometheus is mind jacking Reavers and Crusaders as a means to distract the UCA. Meanwhile, he silently carries out a mass mind jacking. It's some kind of cover-up. One to throw off the government.' I walk up to an East Asian style food stand in the middle of the call. Rigoberto spared some food earlier, but it wasn't enough to replenish me. Howard continues to talk about the possible challenges that Prometheus will be able to throw in front of the UCA.

'You're probably right about that Dias. If he's able to take Uganda, he'll have the confidence to take another nation. He's likely aiming to take all of the orbital elevators with the nations surrounding them. Many of them are not under UCA law which makes this a rather problematic issue. The elevators operate as routers that spread Net connection across vast distances of outer space. The ISS, Mars, and developing space colonies would be under his control.'

'Wait, what!?'

'It's classified, but I'll shed some light on this due to circumstance. The UCA has already refocused its gaze on space colonization. They dispatched a fleet of Bots that are tasked with terraforming Mars. Then there is also a fleet of Bots and Cys that has begun the development of an O'Neil cylinder space colony. The ladder is operating from an expanded wing of the ISS. All of their cybernetics were developed by Gamble. Expected completion of these projects would be 2250 AD. Their fleets would be a lot larger, allowing them to finish a lot sooner, but

we've got our hands tied with Earth. If Prometheus takes control of enough orbital elevators, the future of the Human race will be in his hands instead.'

I sat down at a bench on 3rd avenue, not far off from the Hotel. What Howard just explained was a hard pill for me to swallow. Prometheus is evolving into a global threat. I take a bite of the lo-mein noodles that I purchased seconds ago. 'Prometheus told me that only a hyper quantum computer could run his programming. He wants to build a body with the same capability and believes that foglets would be a core component in the development of such a body.'

'He's evolved more than I could have expected.'

'That's certainly true, but it doesn't make him indestructible. He gave away a big clue; one that simplifies hunting him down.'

'How so?'

'Prometheus said that only a hyper quantum computer could run his programming remember? Megaservers are exactly that.'

'That would imply that he's primarily operating from a certain megaserver.' Howard got excited as he caught the hint.

'Exactly. All I have to do is find out which one it is and then find a way to destroy it. I'm sure Kazuki Keller or Regina Andrews can lead me to it. I just need to keep digging. If I weren't close, Prometheus wouldn't have tried to intimidate me as he did before. I've got the bastard shaking.'

'It's very impressive that you've managed to discover all of that Dias, but have you considered the possibility of Prometheus transferring to another megaserver before getting that close?'

I chuckle and speak with my mouth full of lo mein. He didn't seem to like the poor etiquette of my muffled voice. 'Of course! He can't afford to keep transferring over and over again Howard. You said it yourself, Prometheus has evolved more than you

expected; meaning that he'll surely take up even more memory. The higher the memory, the slower the transfer. Prometheus would leave himself exposed during the transfer process. It's basics man. On top of that, he wants to remain hidden; another reason he's been causing so much trouble throughout NYC. I'll bet there have been similar occurrences in other cities under the UCA. London and Paris for example. They've had a really high surge in their crime rates like Manhattan has in recent times. Then there are proxy AIs he's utilized as well. These proxies go around doing the same thing across the Net Space. The UCA would have noticed his activity and all the transfers he's made between megaservers inside or outside of their networks if not for the huge smokescreens he's managed to occupy them with.'

'All of your efforts will go down the drain if he manages to develop a capable body.' It was hard for me to give Howard a confident answer after he pointed that out. With a body, Prometheus would increase his physical mobility several times over, as well as work remotely. He's already able to see me coming from miles away.

'I'm not gonna let that happen Howard.'

The conversation I had with Howard left me thinking about a lot of things. Space colonization in particular. I don't remember which life it was, or what my name I had either, but there was a time where that was a big deal to me. I'm well aware of the UCA's relationship with outer space. There's a lot of history behind it. They had a strong start during the 21st century, but the Disconnection Purge slowed down a lot of progress. Many big projects were abandoned as people lost faith in the UCA. Cryptocurrencies took the world by storm, cheapening the value of the government dollar. Humanity had gone through various

cryptocurrencies throughout the 21st century. Starting with Bitcoins, and then moving on to more advanced forms as the Net Space and trans-plants came into existence. Trans-plants operate as electric wallets that hold all kinds of currency. It can only be accessed via biometric data. In other words, your trans-plant can only be used by you. Norms suffer the most under today's economy. They rely on mobile devices which are typically very easy to hack remotely. It's also not unusual for a bold robber to just run up on a Norm and take their mobile device by force. Moving on, it seems that the UCA is slowly restoring it's former glory and is making an attempt to go beyond; figuratively and literally. Howard said that the UCA would have a much sooner date of the colonies' completion if they didn't have their hands tied with Earth. I couldn't help but wonder what it is that they had their hands tied with exactly. Especially as I take a look at the corner of 3rd and Bleecker. I'm standing on a sidewalk in the front of the entrance to the Aphrodite Hotel, knowing full well that what I had seen back in The Den with that boy pales in comparison with what I'm about to see here. I've got nothing against sex work, but I do have a problem when it involves children. It's like some of these people have gone back to the dark ages. Many of the young boys and girls, as well as animals who are getting sold off into the adult industry could use a lot of help. We're in a futuristic dark age not that I think about it. The Red Light District is a place where even people with the most disgusting fetishes can be satisfied. The fact that the UCA hasn't addressed any of this tells me that they only have their hands tied with gaining power rather than helping people as they love to claim. Anyway, it's time I get my mind off of this and get ready to start working again. It's 3:25 am at this point. A lot of tourists are wrapping up and getting ready to call

it night while the regulars are sticking around for who knows how long. This is all based on a quick demographic analysis that I did while I was speaking to Howard. Regulars typically keep the fun going for days, indulging in their sexual passions and lust. They count on drugs and cybernetics to stay sexually aroused. Apparently, Dr. Ahmad's E_S03 chip is supposed to take that euphoria to levels beyond comprehension. It would probably be good to poke around with some of the regulars. I could mind jack one of them and infiltrate the Aphrodite Hotel. But who would make for a good proxy? I'm scoping the area and observing as many people as I can. I use both facial and voice recognition software to lookup large quantities of people. A combination of my optic and audio implants. Once I manage to get basic data on them, like their full names, or internet nicknames; I carry out thorough background checks on every individual. I racked up 50 names so that equals 50 background checks happening simultaneously and bringing forth numerous subsets of data pertaining to each individual. There's one name that pops up while I instantly run through the terabytes of data before me: Selena Taylor. I didn't catch her face, but I caught her voice. I'm not surprised to find her mixed into the crowd in front of the Aphrodite. It may actually work in my favor. I could mind jack a regular, and I could ask her to go inside with my proxy at the same time. I don't waste time reaching out to Selena.

She immediately answers as soon as I call her. 'Hi Dias! It's great to hear from you!'

'Same here Selena.'

'What are you up to right now?'

'Not much, just hanging around the Aphrodite Hotel.'

'What!?' What a coincidence! I'm there too.' I laughed after she said that. 'Let me guess, you already knew that didn't you

Dias?’

‘Take a look behind you.’ Selena turns around sees me leaning against the wall of the building next to the Aphrodite. I was easy to spot since there was a bit of open space between the wall and the crowd. There’s a lot of excitement here. People are looking forward to what they’ll find in the hotel. Selena runs up to me to give a hug.

‘You’re funny for that Dias! Did you come here for a good time? You know you could have come to me for that. I know some good men and women who would love to be with you.’

‘Sadly, I’m not here for fun.’

‘That’s right, you’re doing that job for Rigoberto!’

‘Well, it’s for a friend of his really; but that doesn’t matter. I’m trying to reach Kazuki Keller.’

Selena’s expression became less enthused and more concerned. ‘I see. So you’ve heard the news. Kazuki didn’t go public with it yet, but anyone who’s in the know when it comes to the business has already found out about it. Even then, those who know such as myself are far and few across the Red Light District. How did you find out?’

‘How did I find out? I’d say its because I’m very persuasive.’ That made Selena laugh. She smacked my arm as she went on. ‘Selena, are you planning on going in the Aphrodite?’

‘Hell yeah! I hear Kazuki has already begun turning it into a sexual paradise! One that’s better than ever. He’s split the hotel into 3 different levels.’

‘3 different levels? That’s new.’

‘The first level is called the Pleasure level, the second is called the Bliss level, and the third is called the Euphoria level.’

‘So Pleasure, Bliss, then Euphoria?’

‘Yep! You have to reach certain qualifications in order to

progress to each level, Pleasure being the exception. Furthermore, Kazuki has banned any and all weird fetishes like pedophilia or beastality.' I've gotta admit that when Selena told me that last part, I became very excited.

'Holy shit! Really!? Damn, that was the reason I stopped enjoying the Red Light District to begin with.'

'Yep, Kazuki has a lot of huge ambitions for the district. He wants to purge all of those weird and disgusting fetishes. He once profited from that stuff, but I guess he's suddenly grown a conscience.'

'Those were actually significant components of his business. To give them up like that must mean he may want the Keller group to become a legitimate enterprise.'

'It's funny that you bring that up. That's essentially the theory that some people have come to have.'

'It's settled, I'm going in.'

'Dias, I thought you were working though?'

'I can multitask Selena. I'm very good at that.' I start walking ahead of her. 'Come on, let's go in!'

'You're too much Dias.' Selena and I hop in a long line that's formed in front of the Aphrodite.

'I think I'm just gonna mind jack one of the bouncers and have them bring us in. I don't have the patience for this.' Selena starts nudging at my arm.

'Dias! Are you nuts? What if they figure you out?'

'You underestimate my skill. Just sit back and watch.' I target the largest bouncer since she's very likely to be the alpha. It's a muscular woman who looks like she could snap any individual like a twig. She's already connected to the local network here, making it possible to interlink with her profile. I send her multiple viruses that are acting as marketing ads. They do so by

projecting holo images that only she can see. They appear at a certain pace; one after the other. If she falls for the bait and clicks on an ad, then that virus will get into her system and attempt to breach her neural security system. If that's successful, I'll have gained full access to her neuraware. I turn to Selena with a grin on my face.

'You're doing it aren't you?'

'Watch this.' Now I just have to wait for 'muscles' over here to fall for the bait. She's starting to look occupied. Her expression is changing slowly. There we go! She clicked on a fake holo that advertised ways to use cybernetics for more muscle gain. Her neural security system isn't an SNN, but it's quite impressive. It's managed to set up a defense against my virus, preventing me from seizing control of her mind. Good thing her brain isn't exactly strong, otherwise she'd be aware and would put up a lot of mental resistance. A mistake that a lot of people make when it comes to security. Good neural security is a combination of your mental strength and your neural security system. She has not set up the neural pathways that are necessary to defend against people like me. Like so many others, she has left her neural security system to do all of the work. I send another virus her way and eventually bypass her security. It was preoccupied with defending her brain against the first virus. Moving on, the second virus I sent was written in Neu#. It pushes a very specific thought in her mind: to escort me and Selena into the Aphrodite. The bouncer approaches us and begins to follow my command. Selena laughs in amazement. I maintain my interlink with the bouncer after she takes us out of the line and brings us inside.

'I can't believe you.'

'This bouncer is going to be spending some time with us. I wrote a quick algorithm in Neu#. One that would make her

obedient to me. Her neural security system was a challenge to breach.'

'Neu#? Ah, that's the programming language designed for pushing thoughts?'

'Technically it is a gene-editing language. Most people like to call it a thought editing language because of the purpose it serves. I'm one of the few people out there who are skilled enough in its use. It's a subtle art, pushing thoughts into minds. Jackers are experts at this. Masters of the craft. Those people are rare. Not many of them around anymore.'

'What about you? You just demonstrated some serious skills, Dias. That bouncer's not even questioning your command.'

'I picked up a few skills in my profession. Mind jacking being one of them. Can't compare to Jackers though. However, I excel at diving. Nobody can get around the Net Space as well as a Cyber Stalker.'

'That's interesting. Have you ever met a Jacker?'

'As Kenji. I did. Don't remember his name. Black guy with dreads. It's all a bit fuzzy, but I think he was either a Cy or a Bot. It might have been in a life prior to the one I lived as Kenji. My memories are a big mystery.'

'I'll bet.' As Selena holds my arm, we walk through the entrance of the Aphrodite with our new escort. The scenery and ambiance of the main lobby are incredible. At the center is this large fountain with a statue of a naked woman whose arms are raised while water pours from her right palm. Above the statue is a holo projection of a beautiful athletic woman dancing around. As a matter of fact, I see that same woman as soon as I look at the indoor balcony 2 stories above the statue. Then to the left and right sides are regally designed staircases leading further into the main lobby. The music is vibrant, sexy, and exotic. A

soft blend of 21st-century style LoFi hip hop and modern EDM. The crowd in the vast main lobby is more dispersed than it was outside, making it easier to get around. I turn my gaze at Selena to get a look at her expression.

‘You look like you’re about to burst.’

She doesn’t say anything in response to my remark, lets go of my arm, and then walks ahead. ‘This hotel is incredible!’

‘A marvel to behold.’ I look behind to see who joined the conversation. I don’t know who it is, but I do recognize her. It’s that woman. The one with the blue hair and clear caramel skin. She changed her hairstyle a bit, it’s combed and gelled upwards, but she still looks just as great as before. In fact, I’d say she looks even better! She’s wearing a shirt cutting off at the belly again, and black tights. Selena turns to her and smiles.

‘Maya, it’s really good to see you!’ She then rushes to the blue haired woman and gives her a hug. I guess she and Selena know each other well. ‘Dias, I’d like you to meet Maya.’

‘Nice to meet you, Dias.’

‘Likewise Maya.’ I wink at her just as she winked at me hours ago. Selena takes note of that and then gets behind Maya to embrace her.

‘Maya is a very good friend of mine Dias. We’ve spent a lot of time together lately. Lots of good one on one time.’

‘That sounds nice.’ I smile as I observe the main lobby. This must be where the Pleasure level begins. ‘Seeing that you’re here already Maya, I take it you know your way around.’

Maya gently grasps one of Selena’s wrists as it slowly moves closer to her chest. ‘I do.’

‘I’ve got an idea. Why don’t I leave Maya to show you around?’

‘Whoa there Selena, where do you plan to run off to?’ Selena lets go of Maya and walks up to me to place her hands on my

chest. 'There are some things that I'd like to experience alone, that's all.' She kisses me on the cheek as she walks away. Before wandering off, she points at something and makes an expression showing disapproval. I look to see what she was pointing at; it was the bouncer I mind jacked.

'Friend of yours?' Maya looks at the bouncer while shifting her posture.

'Someone who got us VIP access.' I gesture at the bouncer to leave us. A simple command with Neu# alone would have been enough, but the gesture made me look cooler in front of her.

'I see.' Maya walks over and then locks my arm with hers. 'Let me show you around Dias.'

The main lobby of the Aphrodite is occupied with all sorts of activity. There are cafes, restaurant bars, exotic clothing stores, legal HET clinics, and so much more. The backgrounds of the guests become even more diverse. You'll catch doctors, lawyers, software engineers, mafiosos, gangers, and politicians. I'm sitting at a table belonging to one of the restaurant bars with Maya as we both enjoy a few drinks together.

'So you know all about how Kazuki Keller just bought off the hotel?' Maya looks at me with a seductive expression.

'Yeah, I heard from a friend.'

'What do you think of it?'

'Its amazing.'

'It is isn't it? I heard Kazuki let a lot of big wigs come here first. Now he's slowly letting others in as well. He wants to turn this place into a sexual paradise. A place where all of your fantasies can be fulfilled.'

'What's up with the 3 levels anyway? I take it the experience gets better with each level?'

‘Better isn’t the word I would use.’

‘You’ve been through all of them Maya?’

‘I actually work here. So yes, I’ve been through all of them. Each level focuses on different kinds of sexual experiences.’

‘Really? I heard that access to the higher levels requires rank. What you’re saying doesn’t imply that.’

‘Many of our guests have seen it that way, but there’s no ranking system here. And the Aphrodite Hotel’s network runs on it’s own megaserver. I’m sure you’ve noticed that by now Dias. The network is run by an AI that observes how your experience unravels. This AI isn’t given limbic capacity by any means and it’s under heavy restriction from the Logan algorithm. It learns your intimate behavioral patterns and decides which level is best suited for you based on that data. It all depends on how consistent these patterns are within a 1 hour time frame. Some people take hours before their patterns change enough.’

‘That’s interesting. So lets say an hour or so passes, and that the Pleasure level has become boring to me; the AI will step in and decide that the Euphoria level works best for me based on the observed patterns you mentioned? How do people go about learning this? What role does the AI play when it comes to making the transition from one level to another?’

Maya leans on the table with her arms folding and her breasts pressing firmly against them while directly staring at me. ‘Not just handsome, but also smart. I like that in a man.’ I take another sip of my drink and smile at her. Its a simple beer that gives a rather nice buzz. ‘The AI interlinks with the guest and sends an invitation. It will include holo projections that correlate with the respective level being suggested. Its up to the guest to follow up with the invitation.’

‘Does this AI have a name?’

‘It certainly does Dias. It’s called Aphrodite.’

‘The hotel’s namesake. Named after the Greek Goddess of love. That’s very catchy.’ After saying that, I found myself thinking of Prometheus and Icarus. They’re both named after figures in Greek mythology as well. I wonder if there’s a connection? It prompted me to indirectly ask her about it. ‘Do you happen to know who designed the Aphrodite AI?’

‘I think it was some crackpot from the River Garden Complex. I don’t really remember his name.’ Maya leans back a little and takes a sip of her drink. I think about who that crackpot could possibly be and narrow it down to one person: Cipher Quinn. ‘You know Dias, you sound like a cop or a journalist asking a question of that nature.’ I could tell she was teasing me when she said that. Especially since she was still smiling. It gave me a good laugh to be honest.

‘I killed 2 cops a couple of hours ago. You don’t wanna know the rest, trust me. I’m far from being a cop babe.’ It’s actually okay to share that kind of information with people like us. Law breaking is a deep part of our lives and murder happens quite regularly. Doesn’t really matter who. Even when it comes to the cops. Maya leans forward again and her large breasts press against her arms once more.

‘Ooooh. Smart, handsome, and a badass.’

‘What can I say Maya, I’m the whole package.’ I stand up and extend my elbow to her. ‘How about you and I take a walk around? The main lobby alone is vast, and there’s lots to see.’ Maya locks her arm with mine after standing up. She then kisses me on the cheek.

‘I’ll lead the way Dias.’ We walk along the large red carpet covering the floor of the main lobby. Several different groups of people can be seen socializing with each other. Its not your

usual site either. Politicians are hanging out with mafiosos for example. A lot of these people have been on the news. Mixed into the crowds are workers like Maya or Selena, looking to enjoy themselves and make a quick buck at the same time. Many of these guests are huge authorities in society, or big wigs as Maya had put it. These aren't the type of people who Kazuki would be negligent of. He may actually give them his personal attention. I'd be lucky as hell if that were the case! That would make finding him a lot easier. Unfortunately, I can't jump at this potential opportunity right now. Maya is leading me to one of the ballrooms on the left hand side of the lobby. It seems like she's found something for us to do together, but is keeping it as surprise for me.

The ballroom is mostly lit by projections of dancers and advertisements. All of the guests are a lot more calm and mellow than the ones in the lobby. My back suddenly started to ache again, even though my pain stabilizers are active. I'm still able to shrug it off though.

'Want some zone?' Maya pulls out a tube from her right pocket and hands it to me.

'I love zone. It always gives me focus.' I open the tube and pour it over my hand. 'Isn't that light beautiful?'

'Yes, it is.' Maya leans over and takes a sniff. I follow up after her. The music is a lot softer and relaxing than what was being played in the main lobby. Maya takes my hand and leads me across the crowd. I hear laughter in the background, accompanied by loud snorts. The zone begins to take effect on me. I feel calm, clear, and content.

'Where are we going Maya?'

'You'll see.' Maya leads me to the other end of the ballroom,

to the right and through an open passage leading to hallway. In that hallway are over a dozen doors. You can hear sexual noises like moans or banging walls coming from each door. I'm led to the right end of the hallway. Maya approaches the door and waits for it to carry out a retinal scan. Once it slides open, she walks through and pulls me in with her. The moment I'm in, the door closes immediately. This backroom is dimly lit like the ballroom, but the source of light are these blue neon rails at every edge of the ceiling. Maya walks towards the bed and then faces me. She slowly takes her shirt off, revealing her bare naked chest. Her large breasts are beautiful and round. Her nipples are large and fulsome. She slowly removes her tights next, revealing that she wasn't wearing any underwear. Now I'm able to see her body in all of its glory. Her hips are nice and wide, indicting a nice round butt. There's a nice gap of space between her legs right around the crotch area. The same graceful noninvasive nature of the cybernetics remains consistent all throughout her body; giving her a more natural look. Maya slowly approaches and removes my 84 from my shoulder. She leans in really close to my face so that she can whisper in my ear while my optics scan her hairless, flawless body.

'Take off your clothes.'

I quickly follow her instruction and start to remove my vest and drop it on the floor. Then I unbuckle the holster of my Anderson, and the first aid kit Rigoberto gave me. Following that, Maya immediately rushes in to kiss me on the lips and make out. It quickly transitions into French kissing. Our tongues collide as we both embrace each other and walk near the mattress. We eventually fall right in the middle of it, still holding onto each other while her lips lock onto my tongue. My back injury starts to hurt again but I don't care. This pleasurable feeling outweighs

the pain. Maya gets me to sit upright so that she can remove my shirt. She throws it to the side and sees the bandaging wrapped around my torso. We resume our French kiss. I can feel her hand softly pressed against my chest. Then it works its way down. Suddenly, I feel a piercing sensation on the left side of my abdomen. The sensation becomes sharper and sharper. I realize that this sensation is not pleasure, its pain. Maya removes her tongue from my mouth and makes a rather sinister smile. I look down and see what the source of this sensation was. There are blades sticking out from the tips of her fingers, going into the left side of my abdomen. White blood starts leaking from my body, flows down her fingers, and drips from the bottom of her palm. She pulls out her blades and gets ready to penetrate me again. I push her off the bed with all of my strength. I immediately roll in the direction opposite of her. My right hand is placed on the stab wound. Those were monomolecular blades protruding from her fingertips. They went 7 inches deep. She managed to penetrate me with a 7 full inches of pure monoblade. White blood continues to gush from my abdominal wound. She's already standing upright, only a few feet away.

'Maya, what the hell is this!?' She doesn't reply and tries to attack me again. I manage to dodge her first attack as I try to figure out what the hell is going on. 'You're Selena's friend aren't you!?' Now I pull out my blades and brace myself before she makes her next move. I looked her up on the way here and never found anything. She doesn't seem to have an affiliation with a potential enemy. Rather than waiting, I run at her with a series of swings. They're mostly vertical and diagonal. Maya swiftly dodges each of my them and my abdominal wound isn't making this any easier. The more I move around, the more it hurts like hell. Maya takes another swing at me and I step

back to dodge. I look at my right shoulder and notice that it's starting to bleed. Looks like I didn't dodge as skillfully as I thought I did. The pain on my shoulder was a bit delayed. Such is the nature of monoblades. They separate your cells at the molecular level(hence the name), your body doesn't realize that the damage is done until a second or so later. My body picks up on the damage immediately, due to my cybernetically accelerated cellular regenerative abilities.

'This is what happens when you fuck with the Reavers Dias!' Maya charges at me again with a thrusting motion. I move as fast as I can and swing one of my monoblades in a downward horizontal direction at her arm. It flies into the air and lands on the bed.

'So you're with the Reaver Gang!?' I question Maya while she experiences a similar agonizing pain that she just put me through. 'So you're here to get payback for Johann?'

'Not just Strauss. This is for countless other people you killed during your visit to the River Garden!'

'What the hell are you talking about!?'

'Don't you dare play dumb with me. I went through a lot of trouble to find you. Following wild leads that Dre gave me, and then I mind jacked that stupid whore friend of yours in order to get a lead on you.' There was a lot that Maya had said that I didn't quite understand. What does she mean by 'countless other people.' Johann Strauss and those three other Rivers were the only ones I killed. Then there's Dre! That son of bitch really did set me up! It was obvious before, but now I have solid proof. I'm also having trouble concentrating. My injuries are getting worse, and I'm worried about Selena. She might still be under Maya's control.

'Look. I only killed 4 people. Johann, and 3 others.'

‘Bullshit!’ Maya comes at me again. I swing at her but she dodges again. She’s good. While observing her body, I began to notice that her cybernetics were designed for combat. The high sex appeal is meant to throw her targets off, allowing her to efficiently carry out assassinations. She missed her mark with me though. It would have been more effective for her if she stabbed me in the chest. ‘Dre is playing all of you Maya.’ We continue exchanging blows with each other. I manage to slice her across the left hip, but not too deeply. She manages to slice me across my chest in a diagonal direction. She didn’t manage to get so deep either. We’re both beginning to breathe heavy. Maya’s losing a lot of blood just like I am, and it isn’t white blood either. It’s red, therefore not retaining as much oxygen to keep her stamina going as well as mine. I’ll gain the upper hand eventually. If she doesn’t run off that is.

‘Don’t try to weasel your way out of this Dias. The entire Reaver Gang will come for you if I don’t kill you! They’re gonna rip your whole body apart and loot all of your cybernetics!’

‘I was only trying to make you see the truth. If you’re not willing to listen, I won’t waste my breath explaining. You can die pointlessly.’ Maya’s moves become more predictable as she continues to swing at me. I play along and let her think she has me cornered. We’ve been fighting all over the bedroom and made a huge mess out of it. There’s a mixture of red and white blood all over the wooden floor. It starts to look like a mixture of paint, due to the red and white colors swirling into each other. It stops at the door and doesn’t flow under it due to the welcome rug blocking its passage. People probably think we’re fucking right now. That is sadly not the case. I was hoping she’d rock my world, but what was actually happening is something worse. There’s an opening that keeps showing up in her attack pattern.

I take it, and hit her with a forward kick that sends her flying to the porcelain tiled wall. Her body leaves a huge dent with several cracks. She lays on the floor and gasps for air. I walk up and press my foot against her hand with full strength. Killing her wouldn't be entirely meaningless, but before I do that I need to extract intel from her. Maya had cut herself off from the Net Space, so I'll have to connect my wire jack into one of her ports. I pull it out of my neck and connect it to the open port at the temple of her head. She continues to resist but to no avail.

'Get your jack the fuck out of me!!!' I punch Maya in the face to keep her quiet as I attempt to breach her neural security. It compounded with her strong mental fortitude. Her neural pathways are well trained. Highly trained to resist mind jacking. My `syn_scope` (which stands for synaptic scope) program has found that her mind has undergone militarization. Its neuraware that I wrote in a combination of the language MM+. Its meant for the sake of writing high-performance neuraware programs. My program observes the patterns of the subject's synaptic patterns, giving me the data I need to understand their personality. My `syn_scope` engages the neural security system; keeping it occupied with 'dummy' viruses, thus enabling the attainment of psychological data. Neural security systems respond in ways that are congruent with the subject's personality, psychological profile, and neural synaptic patterns. This is possible because of the capacity of the neural security system's learning algorithms enable it to adapt to the subject's brain. Adaptability varies from system to system. Not all neural security systems are equal; some are really good like my customized SNN or Maya's system, while others are just flat out terrible. Thanks to `syn_scope`, I gained access to Maya's mind and jacked it immediately. The first thing I do is put her to rest. She begins to relax and becomes

docile. All that's left is to extract the data I want. I apply search filters that allow me to look through all the memories she has which are relevant to interacting with Dre. There are several thousand different memories, but I only copy the most recent ones. Memories of Dre that are within a 24 hour time frame. After successful extraction, I stab her right through the neck. Then I violently stab her in the gut to return the favor. Following that, I grab my first aid kit and walk into the bathroom. I wave my hand at the smart mirror and command it to activate the sink. Then I change my mind and activate the bath instead. I sit in the tub once it's filled with hot water. The sensation is very therapeutic. While I'm there I begin to apply first aid. I rub the pain soothing ointment and take 6 painkillers. Then I suture my open wounds with a nano spray. Nanites start getting to work as they close the open wound, preventing potential infection. The water turns into a foggy white color as blood continues to flow from my body. Seeing that the nanites haven't totally sealed my wound, I wrap bandages around my abdomen and then cover my shoulder wound and my chest. I lay in the relaxing hot water and let my mind wander. I reflect on all the events that have taken place again. I realized that my pants are still on. Then I look over and see that there's laundry ware in the bathroom. I can wash and dry my clothes. I think of Rigoberto and wonder if he's okay. Hwang said he needed 5 TMK-0012's to deal with him and his PMOs. Rigoberto should be okay though. He's tough as hell. One of the most advanced Cells in this city. TMK-0012's are extremely dangerous, but Rigoberto has highly skilled PMOs to back him up. My mind wanders off to Dre next. That piece of shit Bot.

'I'm gonna kill him.' I say to myself out loud and tightly grip the outer porcelain rail of the tub. Then I let go after realizing

that my tight grip was causing it to crack. My mind keeps racing on and on. She said I killed a lot of people? I've got no recollection of that. She might've been talking about Icarus though. Howard mentioned this; the 7 foot Bot that went on a killing spree across the River Garden Complex. If there's one thing I learned from this moment: its that I'll never be able to return to the comfortable life I had. The Reaver Gang wants me dead and the SCTF too. Oh, and they've definitely sacked my apartment thanks to Hwang. I get the feeling that after my visit to the Aphrodite Hotel is over, I'll have made an enemy of Kazuki too.

//Love_Overdrive

Maya's corpse is laying lifelessly against the wall with a stiff expression. That lifeless stare doesn't really bother me one bit. I actually see her death as a waste though. A beautiful Cy like her is too classy for a gang of savages like the Reavers. My HUD lights up and notifies me of a text from Selena.

Selena Taylor:
How are things going with you two??

I respond with a simple message written with my thoughts.

Dias Velez:
Its going great babe. Let's just say things escalated very fast with Maya.

Selena would worry if I told her the truth. She sends me another text but I don't open it. I resume looking through the memories I copied from Maya while I leave. The exotic noises I heard earlier are still the same, but they no longer serve to build up the excitement that I had before going into the room Maya brought

me to. I'd say they've become more of a distraction for me as I process my thoughts. It's hard to get horny after someone tried to kill you. Sex is an extremely easy tool to use for assassinations. We are at our most vulnerable state when getting intimate with a partner. Weaponizing your body with monoblades like Maya and myself have done; gives you the only means of defense against these kinds of situations. I decide to send Icarus a text to check in on him. He doesn't respond right away which is fine. I've got work to do anyway, and I'm sure Icarus is doing good. A Bot that can escape from the River Garden while going out guns blazing can definitely watch after their own back. I notice that nothing has changed in the ballroom as I emerge from the hallway. There aren't any Reavers within view, but then again; Maya didn't have the look of one. Have they gotten smarter? I wonder. I excuse myself as I walk through and between crowds. The hope that I had of randomly running into Kazuki is long gone. If luck existed, mine would be really bad right about now. I had every intention to exercise extra caution this time around, and look what happened. My body got banged up in some pretty terrible ways. I walk over to one of the bars in the ballroom with the hope of finding a drink that'll keep me going. I'm not looking for an alcoholic beverage at all. Its the typical bar scene: people getting drunk, laughter, gossip. The bartender is a baby faced young man with ginger hair and dark brown skin. He's a Cell who has clearly changed his skin and hair through the use of gene editing languages. The kid immediately walks up to me to see what I'll have.

'Hey man, what's up? Having a drink?'

I lean against the counter and prepare to reply. 'I am, but not alcohol. I need something that'll keep me energized. You seem like a knowledgeable mixologist.'

‘Sure thing. I’ve got something loaded with B vitamins. Give me a few seconds.’ The young mixologist gets to work. He mixes and blends various fruits and dietary supplements together in blending a machine. Then he slows the blending process and pours water as his ingredients become one. Once it’s completed, he pours the drink in a glass pint and slides it to me. I show him my trans-plant and make sure to add a generous tip to the charge.

‘Thank you sir. Enjoy.’ As soon as he said that, I downed the entire pint and exhaled deeply.

‘Thanks. That was a very nutritious drink. It tasted really good too.’ I wave goodbye at the kid and then proceed to walk away. As I head back to the main lobby, I take a look at the biometrics picked up by my neuraware. Every milligram of every vitamin that I just consumed is being displayed in my HUD. That kid knew exactly how to get a Cy recharged. Upon my return to the main lobby, I get a notification of Icarus’ response.

Icarus:

Hello Dias. I am doing well. My cherry has been popped as you instructed. I enjoyed the company of both a man and a woman. They had brought forth excellent sexual performances but; the man that I had hired was a bit too forceful. He was very masochistic and insisted that I punch him during sex. My female partner was very disturbed by this, especially because he had attempted to get violent with her.

I took a deep breath after reading that. He’s got a lot to learn.

Dias Velez:

Icarus, kick his ass out. That fucker's got issues

man .

I had taken a seat at one of the guest chairs to the right of the ballroom entrance. Then I get a notification of Icarus' immediate reply.

Icarus:

I already have. He was very resistant, so I broke his arm and forced him out. Now its just me and my female partner. Oh, and no need to worry about getting any firearms for me, I overheard your conversation with the elderly clerk when you bought my clothes. I went out and got my own gear for a very affordable price. A rifle, a side arm, and a first aid kit; just like you! The rifle is a Riordan 30x30 R90+, and the side arm is a Riordan charge magnum M12.

I'm nodding as I read that text. The Riordan brand is really good. They're relatively new in the gun industry, but they're slowly becoming one of the best. Charge magnums are becoming one of the most prolific side arms due to their very high demand. They run on electric power and therefore fire pure plasma projectiles from the titanium barrel of the gun. The ammo clips are high charge electron cartridges. Its fire power isn't necessarily better than a phaser type gun like my Anderson, but the M12 is easier to use because of its nearly non existent recoil and high accuracy. Wind velocity does not effect its firepower or range, and it's also highly customizable. A craftsman of almost any skill level could modify their M12 for burst fire, single long beam fire(for more accuracy), semi-auto, or spread shot. There are several other kinds of modifications of the M12 that can be made as well. I've been in Spaces where people take simulated versions of the

magnum and turn it into a rifle via extended barrel, addition of a smart scope, etc. Even though the M12 is an incredibly a versatile firearm, I still prefer my Anderson for its raw power. Coupled with it's raw firepower, is the fact that the Anderson is perfectly simulated in every known Space. Moreover, I'm about to initiate a dive into the Aphrodite's Space. My physical body is in a lot of pain and needs to rest. The synthetic tissue of my body is going to take several hours before any real regeneration occurs. I check all of my emails, text messages, and phone calls to make sure I didn't miss anything. Turns out there were a few messages that I did miss. Rigoberto sent me a text after that mess I got into with the SCTF. I scroll further through the tab and see an email from Lucy Hart. An ex-flame of mine who happens to be a very skilled Cyber Stalker.

from: Lucy Hart<lucyhcs@hart.net>
subject: Checking in on you

Hey, I'm reaching out to see if you're well. I spoke with Rigoberto and he brought me up to speed on what's been going on with you. Moreover, your experience back at the River Garden Complex was all over True Media's latest broadcast. Your favorite reporter was the one covering; Walter Price. Shortly after that, news of a 7-foot Bot killing a bunch of SWAT officers went viral. They said it came to extract a murderous Cyber Stalker that they arrested in the midst of an intense firefight that broke out at the Keller building. I assume that this murderous Cyber Stalker is you. That firefight just has you written all over it. It totally fits in with your 'aggressive observation' style which you always loved to brag about. In either case, I know you're working a big job right now, which means that you've been,

and will be doing some serious diving throughout the Net Space. Next time you do, let me know so that we can meet up. I'll come to wherever you dive. Sounds like you could use some help.

P.S. This doesn't mean we're getting back together by any means.

I initiate a dive sequence into the Aphrodite Space while relinquishing control of my body to D-00. All of my data transitions into the Space; which includes all of my gear, my outfit, but not my injuries. My 84 didn't transition either due to a lack of data necessary to simulate the 84's structure in the Space itself. As soon as the dive sequence is complete, I find myself sitting right where I was. I'm still on the same guest seat outside of the ballroom. I'm still in the main lobby, surrounded by the same holo projections. The only difference is the people occupying the lobby. It would appear that the Aphrodite Space is a simulation of the base reality. What's the point in that? I walk over to a random group of people while they're conversing among themselves.

'Hey guys, sorry to interrupt.' One of them looks over at me but doesn't give much response. The lady to his right turns to get a better look at me. She happens to be checking me out. As a result, I start to smirk a little bit. At the present time, I can't indulge in my lustful impulses. Maya was a bit of a wake-up call.

'What can I help you with?'

I observed the rest of the group as they continue with their hang out. Then that lady steps up to me; grabbing my full attention. 'I'm new to the Aphrodite Space and so far, it seems

like a simulation of the base reality.'

'You wanna know what's different about it?'

'More or less. Yeah.'

'Let me show you.' She leans in even closer than before and slowly kisses me on the lips. Aside from being surprised, an intense euphoric feeling surges throughout my body like an electric shock. It's like that feeling you get from your first kiss, but even better. I start to pay attention to her looks now. A pale skinned brunette with a curvy body and a beautiful yellow dress. Her eyes are bright green, and her pupils are dilated.

'Whoa.'

'That's the difference.' I didn't know what she meant. Her kiss has totally disoriented me and I can't think straight. Funny how this happens right after I decide to withhold my lust.

'What is?' After I asked, she kissed me once more and even longer than before. That same feeling surges through my body again.

'How about now?'

'This feeling. It's not normal. A kiss never feels this good without drugs or cybernetics involved.'

'That's right.'

'So that's the difference. The increased pleasure from intimacy. That's what makes the Aphrodite Space different?'

'That's the **biggest** difference, but there are others that nobody really cares for.'

I walk away from the woman and her crowd of friends. My brain needs to process the intense stimulation that it's experiencing right now. For the purpose of keeping a clear mind on the job, I resolve(again) to abstain from any form of sexual activity. I wouldn't do that under normal circumstances of course. Focus and concentration are essential right now. According to my

biometrics, there was a huge increase in the neural transmission of endorphins. Wasn't that the goal of the E_S03 nanochip? To facilitate a higher degree of endorphin transmission? As my body starts to settle down from the powerful euphoria it experienced, I take another look at Lucy's email and decide to respond.

from: Lucy Hart<lucyhcs@hart.net>
subject: Checking in on you

Hey, I'm reaching out to see if you're well. I spoke with Rigoberto and he brought me up to speed on what's been going on with you. Moreover, your experience back at the River Garden Complex was all over True Media's latest broadcast. Your favorite reporter was the one covering; Walter Price. Shortly after that, news of a 7-foot Bot killing a bunch of SWAT officers went viral. They said it came to extract a murderous Cyber Stalker that they arrested in the midst of an intense firefight that broke out at the Keller building. I assume that this murderous Cyber Stalker is you. That firefight just has you written all over it. It totally fits in with your 'aggressive observation' style which you always loved to brag about. In either case, I know you're working a big job right now, which means that you've been, and will be doing some serious diving throughout the Net Space. Next time you do, let me know so that we can meet up. I'll come to wherever you dive. Sounds like you could use some help.

P.S. This doesn't mean we're getting back together by any means.

from: Dias Velez<dvel@velespace.net>
re:subject: Checking in on you

Hi Lucy, thanks for reaching out and checking in on me. I took on a job from Howard Graves if you can believe it or not. Rigoberto recently became friends with him and connected us with each other. Don't ask me how they met, because I don't know. I've been diving cautiously due to the cyber terrorism that's been running amok thanks to Sinn. Dark Spaces are especially dangerous to dive into. I'm sure a skilled Cyber Stalker like yourself knows this. Anyway, here's the NL to the Space I'm currently in 280-0056-000000. You'll definitely know which Space this links to. Please believe me when I say that I'm here for work and not the first thing that comes to your mind. With that clarification aside, let's meet at the fountain in the lobby. Let me know when you get here.

Lucy won't waste time getting here. She still has feelings despite whatever she may say to me or herself. It's a typical pattern that all people follow when they say they still don't love someone. The constant need to declare a belief usually indicates that they believe the opposite of their declaration. A way of building those new neural pathways. She could just write a few lines of code and be done with us. Lucy constantly says she's no longer in love with me but is always quick to find out what's going on in my life. Further proving me right. However, there are those that actually do mean it when they say it. Human beings have similar patterns in their behavior, but that doesn't mean that I can always generalize. Even with all of the complex data that I have stored(and researched) in my high memory unit, there's still so much to Human beings that I can't predict. To get my mind focused on the job, I close my inbox and receive a notification

immediately. It's a text from Lucy. That was fast.

Lucy Hart:

I'm at the fountain.

I turn around and walk in the opposite direction to go and meet with her. Memories of when we were together began to resurface in my mind. We were together for 3 years, but in the Net Space, it was different. More than a lifetime was spent with her. Lucy and I had a favorite Space that we enjoyed. It was a Space that we both developed together. We picked up some Net Space development skills in order to put it together. It was a beautiful island with an endless ocean surrounding it. Nebulas and constellations were within full view. Trees grew at a speed that we both controlled. The fruits that they bore were always ripe and delicious. There was a beautiful cabin on the shore. I would often cook delicious cross-cultural cuisines. Lucy was my world and I was hers. In all the years I've lived, I don't think there was ever a living being capable of capturing my heart the way Lucy did. In a world like today, that kind of thing is extremely rare. Data passes in and out of our brains faster than ever. There's an electronic solution to almost every emotional need you could fathom. According to a True Media statistic that Walter Price shared; less than 10% of the Human race actually falls in love anymore, and 90% of that 10 are Norms and Cells. In fact, sentient AIs are more prone to falling in love than Humans. Over religious zealots say that Humanity has traded up their souls for power. There was a priest who stated that Humanity is cursed by its wealth of knowledge. A wealth of knowledge that God did not intend for us to have. This was often a topic of discussion for me and Lucy. The gift and curse of knowledge, or rather the pros and

cons. What science has done for the world and how it allowed us to love each other the way we did at the time. As I arrive at the fountain and process these memories; I see Lucy. She stands there and looks as beautiful as she always did. Her short jet black hair. Those golden eyes. A soft but well-defined jawline that resonates with her strength of character. She's wearing an exoskeletal suit with neon blue lines on the side of her arms, hips, and all the way down to her legs and feet. Her figure is perfectly shaped and toned. It brings back a nostalgic feeling. I walk up to Lucy and maintain a solemn expression, hiding my excitement to see her. Her scent brings back even more memories. I miss standing next to her. She is only 2 inches shorter than me.

'Hi, Dias.'

I wave at her and stay calm. 'It's good to see you, Lucy.'

'Seriously Dias? You're here for work? That honestly looks like bullshit. I'll bet you went and fucked some random whore as soon as you got here.' I take back some of the things I said. 'I'll bet Selena's here with you too.' Make that everything I just said. The nostalgia is long gone now.

'I really am here for work.'

'All the women here are voluptuous and barely dressed. They're all sex workers!'

'And what about it? It's the Red Light District. What'd you expect? All the men are well built and toned. I'll bet it's been a turn on for you.'

Lucy rubs the end of her nose between the eyes. 'Forget it. Forget I said anything about you sleeping with whores. It's not something I should get worked up over. Tell me about what you've been up to Dias.'

'I need to find Kazuki Keller. It's very likely that he's here.'

'That makes sense. I caught wind of his recent purchase of

the Aphrodite.'

'It's funny that you know about this. I've been told that there aren't many people who know about it, and yet everyone I open up to knows.'

'Don't forget that I'm a Cyber Stalker. It's in my nature to have exclusive information. You wouldn't understand that though.'

'I wouldn't understand? Did you forget we practice the same profession?'

'I told you earlier. When I emailed you, I summed it up in two words: 'aggressive observation'. You spend little time making observations and most of it taking action. Your methods are way too hands-on and far too destructive.'

'My style works though. In fact, it's highly efficient. There aren't many Cyber Stalkers as good as me.'

'But look at what it's cost you Dias. Sure you're better than most, but you have to live by extreme standards because of your methods. In order to have peace of mind and a sense of stability in your life, you take on small jobs that don't pay you shit or make much of a difference in the world. Or you just take on these ridiculously big jobs that put you in positions like the one you're in right now. Another problem that you have is that you like to work alone. You don't network with other Cyber Stalkers much and keep to yourself. Dias; there are a lot of people who want you dead right now.' Lucy quiets down after ranting off. It may be best to let her cool off and think. I wait for 30 seconds to pass and then have my say.

'I have my reasons.' There wasn't much else for me to respond with.

'You need to find a middle ground in your life. Accomplish that, and you'll be happier.' We both grow silent and start walking back up the stairs to the part of the lobby where I had come from.

I start to explain everything that's transpired throughout the past several hours. The existence of Prometheus, what Quinn was working on, and then Icarus. Lucy couldn't believe that Quinn was able to develop something as advanced as a hyper brain. I emphasized over and over how important it is that I find Kazuki. He's the biggest of the three leads that Howard gave me. Lucy began to ask thought-provoking questions after I emphasized the significance of my remaining leads.

'What do you think connects Kazuki to Prometheus?'

'That's an interesting question. Cipher Quinn had a hand in his development. Regina Andrews is an assassin Prometheus has hired several times. They both have obvious tangible relationships with him.'

'What connection would an entrepreneur in the sex industry have with an AI bent on taking over Earth's orbital elevators?'

I stop walking and cross my arms. One thing comes to mind, but it doesn't make any sense. 'It's Aphrodite.'

'You mean the hotel?'

'No. I mean the AI. The Aphrodite Hotel's megaserver is run by an AI that's been given its namesake.'

'I'm aware of that. It was one of the first things I learned about Kazuki's reformation of the hotel. But that can't really be it though. Aphrodite is not sentient. I've never seen its algorithms though; this is just what I know from word of mouth. A trusted source.'

'Where'd you hear it from?'

'A friend who happens to be an employee here. He's a net security specialist.'

'He?'

'There's nothing between us if that's what you're thinking.'

'What's his name?'

‘You don’t need to know that.’

‘No, seriously. This guy might be of use to me. I need to move fast. After the encounter with that Reaver assassin, I’m sure more are coming. Then there’s the SCTF too. As you said, a lot of people want me dead. If this guy can lead me to Kazu-’

‘He’s a sentient Bot named Dre.’

‘What!?’

A dead silence had dropped over our heads after she said that. I told her all about my misadventure at the River Garden and the son of a bitch that got me into all of that. There’s no way it’s the same person.

‘You’re joking right?’

‘Am I the type to joke around Dias?’ I got silent again. My rage nearly possessed me.

‘The same Dre that I described? That piece of shit?’

‘Well, the Dre I know fits the physical description of the one you met.’

‘And Dre happens to be a net security specialist? This is something you’re absolutely certain of?’

‘With Aphrodite being the exception, I’ve seen Dre’s work. He’s good.’

‘How do I find him?’

‘You’re not planning on killing him, are you? Dias, you’re in a Space with a security system that he designed. He definitely knows that you’re here already. You’re at a disadvantage.’

‘How long have you known Dre?’

‘In Net Space time; I would say over a dozen years.’

‘How about the base reality?’

‘Zero.’

‘Can you get in touch with him right now?’

‘Dias.’

‘I promise I won’t try anything crazy. All I wanna do is figure out his agenda. Is he with the River Gang, or is he a net security specialist for the Aphrodite? Who is this guy? This asshole’s also a solid lead to Kazuki.’

‘I’m curious about it myself.’ Lucy initiates an attempt to reach out to Dre via phone call. I want revenge, but I also wanna know what his deal is. ‘Hi Dre.’ She got ahold of him.

‘Lucy, see if he’ll meet with you.’ She immediately gives me an angry stare and puts her palm in front of my face, implying that I should shut up. ‘You wanted to meet anyway? Okay, okay. I wasn’t trying to set you up or anything. Thanks for understanding. We’ll be there soon Dre.’

‘We’ll be there soon?’

‘He knows you’re here Dias. Just as I said he would.’

‘That little snake definitely has something up his sleeve.’

‘Maybe.’ Lucy does this disapproving gesture with her hand. ‘Dre says he’ll meet us at the Euphoria level.’

‘If we can make it there. In other words, that’s the deal he’s made. The Dre I know loves to make deals.’

‘The only known way to make it to Euphoria is to go through the experience and see if Aphrodite will decide which level best suits your taste. I’m sure that this is an extremely suitable deal for a manwhore like you Dias.’

‘You’re part of it too.’ Anger and jealousy started to get the better of us both. The tension and emotions between Lucy and me are starting to build up as a result. We refrain from making any further remarks with any relevance to our past romance.

‘Who knows how much sexual activity it would take for the Aphrodite AI to send us an invitation to Euphoria? It varies greatly between all individuals. We could both end up with invitations to different levels, or one of us could remain on this

one.'

'You got an idea in mind?'

'We're Cyber Stalker's Dias. Two highly skilled Cyber Stalkers. So let's put our heads together and think of something.'

'Maybe we could look for a way to access the megaserver's source code?'

'That's a good way to go. We'd have to tread carefully though. Dre's security system will surely engage us. It'll mean a lot of trouble if that happens.'

'How efficient is his system?'

'The security system was built from the reverse engineering of the SNN as a foundational schematic. Dre expanded upon that and created the Janus system; the neural network that thoroughly protects the hotel.'

'Could you identify some of these expansions for me?'

'Janus manifests itself in the form of the Safeguard; security AIs that follow its commands. These commands typically involve the safety and well being of the hotel and it's guests. Each of them serves a unique purpose since Janus designs their algorithms based on the situation or threat that's being faced.'

'Just like the SNN.'

'Yes, but at a much larger capacity. These AIs take on a bodily form in the Aphrodite Space as they engage their targets. Meanwhile, in the base reality, they will assist the Keller private security team with their strategies via statistical analysis and override the security Bots to seize control of them.'

'In other words, the Safeguard is who we need to be on the lookout for as we breach the megaserver. They'll attack us as soon as we start.'

'That's right. It's nothing unusual though.'

'Yeah, nothing but nitty-gritty Cyber Stalker work.'

‘Exactly Dias. There’s no room for aggressive observation here either. We’re taking on an extremely advanced security system. Now, on the other hand, there is another way to go about facing it.’

‘What would that be?’

‘Physical access to the Aphrodite megaserver. It would be much easier to access its source code with a manual jack. However, that will present its own set of challenges.’

‘I was about to point that out. Keller security agents and the security Bots assisting them. They happen to be S04s and they’re everywhere. With the Janus system in control, I wouldn’t be able to achieve what I did back at the Keller building.’

‘Let’s split the things down the middle. I’ll handle things on my end in the Aphrodite Space while you handle your end from the base reality.’

‘We’ll be prone to higher risks if we work separately.’

‘Be that as it may, a lot more will get done. Second, you’re physically at the hotel. I’m not. Third, you asked me for help; so I’m doing this on my terms. Not yours.’

‘In that case, I suppose we’ll have it your way, Lucy.’

‘Good. You better be grateful for my help Dias.’

My dive sequence has ended, and I’m currently thinking of ways to start off my end of the work. There’s that really muscular bouncer that I mind jacked earlier. I still have access to her neuraware. With that in mind, I wonder how much access she has to the Aphrodite Hotel? I decide to take full possession of her body and once again relinquish control to D-00. Finding a location to hide out while I do my work is a necessary precaution to keep myself safe, so I issue that command to D-00. It’s been commanded to go back to the room where Maya’s corpse is at

and to remain there until I relieve it from duty. Since I have full control of this bouncer, I decide to go through the files in her high memory unit. There's a program installed that allows her to browse through memories of life experiences. These memories are categorized into different types of experiences. Whether its work-related, family, romance, friendships, or just random bullshit. Then there are sub-categories like social interactions, opinions, facts, etc. It gets more and more scrambled as I go deeper. She really could use better programming in her nueraware because her memory unit is completely disorganized. A real clusterfuck of data. Within a short amount of time, I manage to find the set of memories correlating to the hotel. Andy has access to all floors and levels; but she does not have any access to the Aphrodite megaserver, much less know where it's located. My next step would be to find someone who knows, and mind jack that individual. Finding someone like that will prove to be challenging. I searched through Andy's memories again and filtered anyone who wasn't a high ranking member of the staff. The next thing I do is filter out every department that isn't involved in security or cybernetics. The list of names is long but not nearly as extensive as it was before. After I'm done applying filters, I narrow my search down to two people; Dr. Ahmad and Dre. They're heads of their respective departments. Dre is not only in charge of network security but is also in charge of the hotel's overall security, while Dr. Ahmad is in charge of cybernetics development. Finding Dre is presumably impossible at the moment of course(unless I go through the levels). We're on this crazy misadventure because of him. Moving on, most of the doctor's work is relatively the same as it is at the Keller building. Perhaps he's using data from guest experience at the Aphrodite for his work on the E_S03 nanochip? Furthermore,

Dr. Ahmad operates from the Keller building still. The Keller building's network was recently turned into a subnetwork of the Aphrodite Hotel and now operates from the same megaserver. It still ran on its own security system though; but since their recent incident with me and the SCTF, they've begun integration of the Janus system into theirs. For that reason, the risks I run breaching the Keller building's network will likely be just as great as it is here. I'll have to deal with the Safeguard. It's inevitable.

//Deep_Dive

Lucy and I split up the work; she handles her end from the Aphrodite Space, while I handle mine in the base reality. No aspect of that arrangement included the Keller building's corporate Space, and it turns out I'll have to initiate a dive into there. I uploaded my `_cont_` virus into Andy's neuraware so that I could still issue commands after leaving her body. It'll only last for an hour though, but that's more than enough when converted to Net Space time. From her memory, I managed to get the access key to the Keller building's Space, which actually happened to be private. I'm expecting to find several corporate executives and scientists who like to hold meetings and discuss business in whichever manner they choose. First and foremost, I enter my private Space so that I can set myself up for a deep dive. Setting up would include picking the right outfit, hairstyle, and weapon to take along. I pick a black business suit with a look that's identical to what Rigoberto usually wears and I slicked my hair back. A sidearm that's of a different make than the Anderson. Similar to the 84, it's a suppressed Black & Lions magnetic G12 9mm handgun. They're a very good brand if you

want a firearm for use in the Net Space. It's a brand that's actually exclusive for Net Space use to begin with. It's better for stealth too. With this set up established, I initiate my dive. The vast and limitless nebula theme of my private Space turns into a sea of machine language rushing towards me like always. It all goes white, then blue, and then countless colors begin to follow. After that, the process loops and loops. Eventually, I arrive at a gate-like structure that's made up of different shades of neon green. Behind me is nothing but an empty black void with streams of code floating about in various directions. It's the raw emptiness of cyberspace, and this gate is the path to my destination. I walk up to it and an interactive screen projects in front of me. A message is displayed across the screen in large and bold letters.

PLEASE ENTER THE ACCESS KEY: _____

After I entered the key, the prompt had changed.

WELCOME

The gate immediately opens and reveals the Keller corporate Space. I don't waste time walking through it.

The structure of the Keller Space is highly abstract and weird; a massive Mobius strip-shaped landscape that stretches several miles long. Additionally, it's not an outdoor type of landscape, nor is it a traditional cityscape. It's a shiny white floor with various exotically shaped buildings scattered everywhere. Every object, tree, and building is colored in white and they all

have a sort of porcelain-like texture. The only thing that's not colored in white is the people themselves. They all have the unique colors of their clothing, skin complexion, eyes, and hair. Then In between the empty gaps of the Mobius strip is nothing but a black void. Just like the one that was behind me before I walked through the gate. This Space is probably well over 30 miles long. It's not massive, but it would take a long time to cover that distance by walking. The most important thing I need to do at this point is to find a place where people are going to congregate in large numbers. I don't want to check a bar or cafe as usual. That being the case, I decide that it's time I change my routine a little bit. Predictability is an easy mistake to make. The Keller Space has a newsfeed that all of its guests can view at any time. I open my HUD and browse the feed. The events tab is a good area to check. After clicking it, hundreds of events project right in front of me. Thumbnails of different parties, shows, and clubs. There's a cybernetics seminar taking place in 30 minutes. Walter Price is the keynote speaker for this event too: 'Cybernetics, AI, and You'. Not very unique of a title for a talk, but it's Walter Price. He's one of the best reporters out there and True Media wouldn't be so great without him. I set my GPS program for where the seminar's taking place. The fastest route there is the train, which is only a couple of meters away. As soon as I reached the platform I see it arriving. It was a shiny white bullet train with cool grey highlights. I look at the people surrounding me who were also waiting on the train. They all have blank expressions. The kind of look that you get after a long day of work, and for some reason; they all look very familiar. I've seen some of these passengers on the news. High-level employees who do a lot of other work on the side. Bullshit politicians or philanthropists; that's who some of them are. One

person really sticks out though, and I can't believe who it is. It's the man himself; Walter Price. His appearance is easy to recognize anywhere. Walter has the look of a typical middle-aged man in good health. A very masculine jawline, grey combed over hair with a fade and a clean shave. After boarding the train, I walk straight up to him. He's a Norm; so it shouldn't be possible for him to dive. Speaking to him shouldn't compromise me in any way. He's sitting at the corner near the railing. The interior of the train is white and eerie. Walter looks at me as I get closer. He knows I'm probably about to say something to him.

'Is there something I can help you with sir?' His voice was very firm and also crisp in a way. You just get the sense that he's a very articulate man. He'd have to be in his line of work. The calm stare of his blue eyes is also a bit unnerving. It's the sincerity of it. Such sincerity is rare these days; at least from a first impression. His complexion is real. A clean tan skin tone indicating his Native American descent. None of it is engineered or modified in any way. After I process my observation of Walter, I decide that the first thing that I want to ask him is how the hell he's able to dive. I thought his seminar was going to be a broadcast, not a full body digital appearance in the Net Space.

'You're Walter Price correct?'

'I am. Did you want an autograph or something?' Walter starts to change his posture and crosses his legs.

'Not at all. But I do have a question if you don't mind.'

'Sure. Ask away.'

'How are you here? It's impossible for Norms to dive.'

'You must be new. When did you start working for the Keller Group?' I can't tell him who I really am, so I have to lie a bit.

'It's been a week now. I just got access to the Keller Space today.'

‘Which department do you work for?’

‘Cybernetics Development.’

‘I see. You’ll learn about it soon I suppose, but I don’t mind telling you.’ The doors of the train begin to slide close before beginning transit. I hold on to the railing above me and look at Walter as he explains. ‘BCI’

‘Brain-Computer Interface? So you installed neuraware onto your brain?’

‘No.’

‘Then how is this possible? You being here?’

‘It was a concept that was originally meant for Norms. Long before cybernetics were woven into the bodies of man. Long before neuraware. BCIs were noninvasive devices that synchronized with the electric signals of your neurotransmitters. Signals sent from the device would enable you to interact with the Net Space while your body is in full suspension. It would hook up to a drive while being put to use. Norms can only dive for a certain period of time due to their bodily needs like food and water.’

‘That’s very fascinating.’

‘Indeed. Furthermore, the body won’t need to sleep.’

‘How the hell so?’

‘It gets most of the rest it needs when Net diving. It is a process that’s very much the same as sleep. Your body shuts down during a dive.’

‘Like being in a dream state.’

‘Exactly. There are exceptions to that though. Your brain is still active during a dive. All of that activity will have an effect won’t it?’

‘Yeah. I was just thinking that. So what’s done in that case? Are there solutions?’

‘There are. Solutions which depend on your headset’s programming of course. With the right programming in place, you could choose to have the experience of diving in the same format as a dream. You are familiar with the sensation of waking up from one right?’

‘Am I? Not at all. I’m a Cy. We don’t have dreams.’

‘I can tell. Cys do not know what it is to dream due to their neuraware. When you wake up, your memory of it fades.’

‘Why would a Norm dive if that’s how they choose to experience it.’

‘When choosing the dream frame for a dive, all memory gets stored in their drive. That memory file would be available for viewing whenever they choose to do so. Their thoughts, visuals, and all other input received via the 5 senses. They can relive their memories.’

‘I see. I take it that the alternative to that frame would be one where the diver is more conscious.’

‘Correct. The C-frame. The diver will consciously experience the Net Space. Their body will be suspended, but not in a dream-like state.’

‘So they’ll retain all of the data in their brain? The need to rely on an external drive would be obsolete. Drawback to that is obvious though. We’re talking about a fully organic, standard brain. Dive would have to be extremely short before it gets overloaded.’

‘You’re a sharp guy you know.’

‘Thanks. I’m very well versed in cybernetics, which includes extensive neural biological knowledge.’ After a very stimulating conversation with Walter Price, I check to see how close we are to our destination. There were many more questions that I wanted to ask him. He went on to explain the functionalities of the

headset that allowed people without neuraware to dive. These headsets were programmed with software called frames. There were two kinds: D-frame, the dream frame he first explained; and the C-frame, which was the ladder. There are other kinds of frames with different kinds of programming. Thoughts of many different possibilities begin to take shape in my mind. I find myself thinking that Rigoberto could have a use for this.

‘This is my stop, eh-’

‘Dias.’

‘It was a pleasure to meet you.’

‘Likewise. We might bump into each other later on. I’m actually attending your seminar. I’ve got some business to attend to in that area as well.’ Walter smiles and shakes my hand before walking away. He wished me well and expressed how much he enjoyed our brief time together. It caused him to consider revising the material he already wrote. A damn shame that I won’t be able to enjoy it to the fullest. The seminar is taking place at a stadium with multiple auditoriums inside of it. From the platform, it is within full view. Large holos are projected in front of it. Windows that display ads of different events in a manner similar to the tab I checked from my HUD earlier. Walter’s talk is the biggest event that’s taking place. Dr. Ahmad is bound to be there.

There are a lot of people who want to see Walter Price speak, so the entrance to the stadium is packed. Nobody really cares for the other seminars or shows that are happening. Almost everyone here has a ticket to ‘*Cybernetics, AI, and You*’ tagged onto their suit. I start to merge with the crowd while making my way inside the main entrance. It’s very large, which prevents ridiculously long lines from forming. Since the crowd is large

and entering all at once, people occasionally bump into each other from time to time. Nobody is getting angry though. They're all a bunch of upscale, well-mannered rich fucks who pretend they're sorry when they do. You know, the types who often have those loud arrogant laughs, or use big words to look smart. When they bump into me or rub shoulders, I resist the urge to tell them to fuck off. But there's this one lady though. She bumps right into me; as if she were rushing. This lady almost fell too, and nearly took me down. I try my best to hold my breath. She turns to face me and starts cursing.

'What the hell is your problem!' After saying the first thing that came to mind, this woman's anger vanished. She started giving me this strange look. Almost like she knew me or something.

'What's the matter? Starstruck by my good looks or something?'

'Dias? What the hell are you doing here!?' Her voice is somewhat familiar, but I don't think I've met her before.

'I'm sorry lady, do I know you?'

'Of course you do you moron. It's me!' I stand there looking puzzled as hell. Saying 'it's me' doesn't really ring a bell. So annoying.

'It's Lucy you damn fool!'

Lucy punches my arm. Not a very discrete thing to do considering our situation. Her appearance is really different. A black business suit with a skirt, high heels, and pulled up hair.

'I thought you'd focus on finding the megaserver? You remember the plan right?' Lucy starts to speak at a lower tone. I send a tele-link to make it easy for both of us.

'This is a better way to communicate don't you think?'

'What happened to the plan?'

'My infiltration has led me here. And besides, you said you had the Aphrodite Space covered. Not the Keller Space.'

'So what led you here!?'

'Dr. Ahmad.'

'The Keller Group's head of cybernetics? He's here?'

'I don't know for sure, but I figured this would be a good place to search.'

'The Keller Group Stadium?'

'So that's what this spot is called?'

'Dias, there is a seminar being hosted by Walter Price. Tell me that's not the reason you're here.'

'I already told you why I'm here. And besides, I ran into him on the train. If I were looking to have time with him and be a total groupie, then those 10 minutes were it.'

'Good thing you got to settle your hardon for Walter. You've always been a real fanboy of his.' An announcement goes off, stating that Walter's seminar is about to start in 4 minutes. Our conversation was somewhat interrupted but gave us an idea as to how we would want to approach the situation.

'Hey, what do you say we stand at a corner somewhere. It would give us the chance to observe the crowd and scope around for Dr. Ahmad.'

'I didn't come here for Ahmad.'

'What the hell did you come for?'

'To meet with Robert'

'Robert!? You mean Robert Genghis Sanchez? Rigoberto's father?'

'We work together sometimes. And we do occasional favors for one another too. Robert has information on Dre. It could be invaluable.'

'Invaluable? In what way?'

'Dre used to work for him.'

'You're shitting me.'

'Not at all.' The crowd starts walking into the auditorium for Walter's seminar. Hundreds of conversations continue to grow louder as the tension builds up.

'It's not a lead or anything, but it'll help me gain a better understanding of him.'

'You said Dre was a friend. Furthermore, what would Robert understand about him that you don't?'

'I referred to him as a friend in the loosest sense. As for Robert, I don't really know. But I figure that info from him is bound to be helpful.' Her point is a valid one. Robert's a 200-year-old Cy; which means he's first generation. He was born before cybernetics or biotech became so mainstream. Before their democratization for the masses.

'It's best if we split up from here. I've gotta be on the lookout for Ahmad and you need to see Robert.'

'Just make sure you stick to plan after you're done here. Everything goes to shit if you don't. I'm here to help you out, so I'll be really pissed if you fuck this up.'

'Sure thing babe. Eh, boss.' She gave me a really bitchy glare after I said that. We both immediately go our separate ways and tend to our tasks. I isolate myself to a far off corner. One where I could get an open view of the attendees. Once I establish that I initiate an optic scan of the entire audience. With a large audience like this, it can become time-consuming. My multi-spectrum of vision is advanced, but not fast enough in this case. I'm using computer vision, or rather, cy-optic vision to analyze the dense crowd. Many of them have privacy settings programmed into their Net Space profiles. Normally, I would see a crapload of relevant data like age, race, sex, occupation, etc.

It's the same kind of setting that blocks off facial recognition like the SCTF operative's security programs do. With that being said, voice recognition is the only way to go. That's going to be even more time consuming though. It takes more time and effort for recognition software to make out a voice than it would a face. Sometimes people can have extremely similar voices, or background noise can interfere with the recognition process. Furthermore, people change their voices all the time. Among all of the noisy clutter, I do manage to make out Robert's voice. Seems like Lucy is already speaking with him. I wonder what brought him here of all places. Why does he have access to here? Robert hates megacorporations with a passion. Did Rigoberto manage to do some convincing?

'Hey, don't tell Robert that I'm here okay?' It'll be inconvenient for me if he knows. Robert's wanted me back in the Sanchez Family for a long time. He's actually pissed off that I never returned.

'Don't eavesdrop.' Lucy cut our tele-link after that. I still decided to eavesdrop anyway.

'Lucy.' Robert greets her in his usual stern manner. He has the same appearance that I saw him have 20 years ago. A blend of Chinese and Latinx features. Clean shave, unlike his son. A much more chiseled jaw and piercing large eyes that show his immense confidence. Hair that's twice as long as Rigoberto's; nearly reaching down to his lower back. A ponytail of course, and large bangs on the sides of his face. Like his son. His nose is perfectly shaped and well rounded. Not a single wrinkle and barely any cybernetic crevices on his skin. He's wearing a much more crisp modern business suit than Rigoberto. It's got pinstripes too. I'm not really a business suit kind of guy, but he does wear it well. His appearance is where the similarities with Rigoberto

stop. Unlike his son, his voice is very deep and intimidating. He's a man who holds a lot of power. One of the world's greatest authorities. A kingpin of organized crime in a highly cybernetic world. Many of the Dark Spaces is in his back pocket. Robert is not the kind of guy I would ever cross. Good thing he considers me a friend. I hope.

'Thanks for meeting with me Robert.'

'It's a pleasure, Lucy. How are you?'

'I'm good.'

'I have other appearances to make today. So this has to be quick. I apologize.'

'That's perfectly fine. I just want to know more about Dre. He used to work for you.'

'Yes. That is correct. Dre is an AI with many talents. A product of my enterprise. Produced by a brilliant engineer from one of my many companies.'

'Is he dangerous?'

'He can be. It depends on what his motives are. I never had any problems with him.'

'I need to meet with him, but he says he can only be reached from the Euphoria level of the Aphrodite Hotel. Dre wants me to go through the levels.'

'Ha!' It's rare to see Robert laugh or smile. Damn near impossible if you ask me. At least in my experience. 'That sure sounds like him. He's playing games with you Lucy.'

'I don't plan on playing his game.'

'Why not? You work really hard you know? Dozens of hours of sex might be a great way for you to unwind a little. Take it from me.'

'I see your point, but I'm way too busy.'

'Good luck to you if you're planning to outsmart Dre. You

already know how advanced his security system is. Janus is one of the best nonsentient AIs out there. And the Safeguard is relentless in their efforts.'

'I've faced worse.'

'That doesn't mean you'll come out of this in one piece.' Lucy got quiet and looked away after that. Seems like she was reflecting on a past experience. 'Don't forget what happened last time you bit off more than you could chew. You're still suffering from it.'

'I don't see it that way. In fact, I'm better than before. By the way, do you know anything about Dre's ties with the River Gang?'

'He mind jacked his way into their ranks. Nothing special really.'

'Why would he need to do that?'

'It was probably for a job. Dre does some freelance work from time to time. And he's a jack of all trades too.'

At that point, I decided to focus my attention on my task. My curiosity's been satisfied enough already. I continue my search for the doctor as the seminar begins. The applause from the audience completely disrupts my search. After I wait it out, the search becomes a lot easier. Everyone is quiet since they want to listen in on what Walter Price has to say. I finally manage to spot Dr. Ahmad thanks to that. He's sitting next to another researcher. They're both in the middle of a conversation it seems.

'So you're saying this E_S03 chip will revolutionize neu-raware? Are you really that confident in its capability?'

'Absolutely. It may be designed for sexual experience, but imagine what other benefits it may hold if modified for other forms of neural transmission.'

‘Howard told me he might be willing to make a purchase. Of course, he would need to see it in action first. A live demonstration in one of your specimens.’

‘How much is Gamble Industries willing to invest?’

‘A sizeable fortune. But that is something to be discussed between Kazuki and Howard.’

‘And what of Robert? You know he’s here right?’

‘Yes, so I’ve heard. Rigoberto had told me so, but he’s not the reason.’

‘Kazuki was the one who convinced him to show up. Those two have some history together. Robert has invested in many of Kazuki’s enterprises.’

‘It’s also been vice versa.’

‘Indeed. Robert hates megacorporations, but Kazuki wants to turn the Keller Group into one. So he’s begun to sell all of his illegal franchises to local gangs and aspiring crime families. Robert is someone he considers to be very trustworthy. For that reason, Kazuki wants him to be involved in his new transition. Which would mean that the Sanchez Crime Family’s influence will reach the corporate world.’

‘He’s already one of the most powerful men in the world. The corporate world is deeply woven into the Directive Board of the Executive Branch. Many of their leaders are members of it. Robert will become one of those leaders. This will further elevate him, also increasing his potential as a threat to the UCA’s infrastructure.’

‘But the Sanchez Family would be a huge asset though. They legally own multiple small companies and clinics across NYC. And they practically have South America under their control. Mexico and Brazil have also thrived as nations because of them.’

This is a very interesting conversation, but none of it is really

helping me. I can't just walk up to Dr. Ahmad, put a gun in his face, and force him to tell me how to reach Dre. I took a look at all of the data I copied off of him and came out empty-handed. The E_S03 was really interesting to learn about though, and perhaps I can offer it to Howard for extra creds. Or I could sell it off to another megacorp for that matter.

'Look, Professor Cheng. I'm gonna get going. I have work to do.'

'Dr. Ahmad. It's a pleasure. The Keller Group has a very bright future ahead. Perhaps you and I will be working together very soon.'

'Why don't you stop by my private Space sometime? You and I can spend a lot of time together there.' They both smile and stare deeply into each other's eyes. Seems like there's a little more to their relationship than just work.

'Send me the NL.'

'Already have. You'll have to go through the Hades Space to reach the node that connects to mine though. The Hades Space is a Dark Space, but it's under the protection of the Janus system. So it's just as secure as any Space under the UCA's jurisdiction.' Professor Cheng is my lead. I'll follow him, extract Dr. Ahmad's location and kill Cheng so that I won't have any loose ends. Since the Hades Space is a Dark Space, Janus probably works even harder to keep it safe. Harder than it has back at the Aphrodite Space. This means Safeguard will definitely be encountered there.

Cheng walked out of Walter's seminar before it ended, and of course, I followed him. He's walking towards the train's platform and seems to be heading somewhere else. It's not very populated here. Most people want to catch the event. So I rush

up to Cheng from behind and grab him by the arm. Then I point my gun at him.

‘Professor Cheng. Don’t try to get brave, otherwise, this’ll get messy for you.’ Cheng remains quiet and cooperative. There’s no resistance from him at all, making this easy.

‘Who are you?’

‘I’m the one who’ll be asking questions here.’

‘You’re Dias Velez aren’t you? I can tell by your appearance. Dark grey hair, tan skin, red eyes. Ahmad told me about you.’

‘So you know what I’ll do to you if you keep asking questions right?’ Cheng doesn’t respond. I put my gun back in its holster. It’s not needed to intimidate him anymore. He has an idea of what I’m capable of doing. ‘The train’s here. Let’s go.’ I let go of Cheng’s arm so that we could look normal while boarding.

‘What do you want from me? You want to reach Ahmad is that it? You’ve already got a copy of his research don’t you?’

‘Remember what I said about asking questions? You must have a death wish Cheng.’

‘You’re likely going to kill me anyway.’ I pull my gun back out and shoot him in his gut. Don’t have time for this interrogation shit. The other passengers back away from us in fear. My gun is silent, but they still saw him dropping to the floor and bleed everywhere. I grab Cheng from the scruff of his lab coat; pull my jack out and connect it to his face. Mindjacking works mostly the same in the Net Space. Core functions are damn near identical.

‘The Safeguard are going to come for you, Dias. You have no hope.’ I ignore Cheng as I breach his neural security. He’s protected by an SNN like me and the doctor. Breaching his memory is going to be difficult, but not impossible. At least he can’t put up much mental resistance due to his current state. Crying and screaming can be heard in the background but it

doesn't really manage to break my focus. I get deep enough into his memory to obtain Dr. Ahmad's location.

'See Cheng, that wasn't so hard now was it?' I blew a hole through his head after getting what I needed. When people die in the Net Space; the trauma is received by their brain. Which in turn causes their physical death too. It's a lot like disconnection, but much worse since the victim doesn't even continue to live on in any form. The body shuts down as brain fluid and blood gushes from their nostrils. They cease to exist in the Net Space too. Data can be salvaged, enabling a sort of resurrection of the individual, but they're never the same. An alarm starts to go off on the train as it stops in the middle of transit. It's on a track that's located within the empty gap that's at the center of the Mobius strip. This track happens to connect both ends of the strip and since it's been suspended here, I've basically become a sitting duck. One that's afloat in midair. Fucked up part about this is that I can't end my dive. It's been blocked off. Must be Janus. If that's the case, then Safeguard has probably manifested on this train. I look ahead and see a figure emerging from the other cart. I aim my gun in its direction just in case. Streaming white flashes come at a high rate of speed and cause destruction around me. As the white flashes momentarily subside, I get a clear visual of my enemy. A towering 8-foot figure covered in black. It has a soft human face that's pale like a corpse, but somewhat angelic at the same time. Its eyes have a bright blue glow. This is a Safeguard. The rest of its body is like a slightly pixelated silhouette. It's armed with a phaser SMG of an unknown make. I fire back at the Safeguard and land a direct shot to its chest. Not a single scratch was left on it. I continue to open fire and still end up with the same result. What the hell? There has to be some kind of weakness. The Safeguard returns

fire at me. Fortunately, the matter that Space's are made up of follow different rules in the base reality. Even though a phaser is being fired at me, the railing that I'm using as the cover isn't totally destroyed. I look behind me and turn to sprint towards the staircase leading to the train's second floor. An inaudible speech pattern is coming from the Safeguard. It might be trying to say something to me, but I can't make out a damn thing. I walk around with my G12 ready. Realizing it's proven to be useless, I holster it and roll my sleeves up. Maybe my blades might be effective against it? I hid behind one of the empty seats, waiting for the Safeguard to arrive. Seems like there is only one; presenting an excellent opportunity to gather some combat data on this thing. The murmuring and cries of the other passengers make it easy for me to rely on stealth. Assuming it's auditory functions aren't on the cutting edge, my movements can be clouded by all the background noise. I can hear the sound of it approaching. The damn thing draws closer and closer. I immediately emerge from my hiding spot and slice it's SMG in half. Good thing the injuries from the base reality didn't carry over to here. I wouldn't be able to do this otherwise. The Safeguard manages to hit me with a forward punch to the face. It's punch picked me up off my feet and sent me falling on my back. After that, it grabs me by the neck and lifts me up so that it can begin to repeatedly punch me in the gut. I start to cough white blood in its face. Its blank expression remained the same. Its eyes glow even brighter as it's grip tightens on my neck. I stab it in the chest, only to see it achieve nothing. Safeguards are essentially programs written by a greater program. With that realization, an idea comes to mind. I could try to access its source code, or upload a virus and fuck with its programming. There are ports on its face that I could jack to, so this idea might

be worth a shot. I pull out my wire and shove it into it's left cheek. The Safeguard is protected by a security network that resembles an I-drone's. I create an algorithm for a virus that served the same functionality as the one I used to fuck up those drones. I can't issue any commands yet, but I can project trillions of bullshit pieces of content that'll overwhelm it. After achieving this, the Safeguard lets go of me. Finally allowing me to breathe. The Safeguard starts to speak very loudly in its inaudible speech as it aggressively twitches in several different directions. My jack is still connected to it too. While it's still distracting, I breach its neural network and access it's memory. As I go deeper into it, I learn that this Safeguard is designed with a framework that's based on the human brain. Things get really strange from here. This Safeguard has limited sentience. Why would Janus give sentience to its own programs? Does this imply that Janus has sentience? Now I'm able to upload a `_cont_` virus into its neural network and begin issuing commands. First, deactivate the alarm. Second, get the train back in motion. Last, shut down. With that, I can conclude my time in the Keller Space and be on my way. This deep dive is going to go even deeper.

//Disconnection

The Hades Space is strange. It's like the opposite of the Keller Space, but rather than being shaped like a Mobius strip; its structure is shaped like Penrose stairs. Of course, it's not made up of actual stairs. The Hades Space is a flat landscape and everything is colored in black. It's dark, exotic, and abstract. It's a Dark Space, so there aren't just executives or researchers. There are black market entrepreneurs, gangsters, and Red Crusaders too. I can't help but wonder why the Keller Group would choose such weird looping structures for the design of their Spaces. Aphrodite is the exception so far, and I'm hoping Dr. Ahmad's is too. I'd rather not experience this again. Moving on, I find myself thinking of the base reality. D-00 hasn't reported anything new, so my body must be okay. Not much real time has passed, but I can't help but feel like I've been submerged in the Net Space for a long time. Dive overdrive is where these feelings stem from. A sickness that can happen when diving between Spaces for extended periods of time. Your mind starts to get all fucked up. I did quite a bit of diving, but it's the stress that's making it worse. A lot has happened

in a couple of hours, and my body has sustained heavy injury without enough care. Aside from the sensation of the extensive passage of time, there's a personality disorder, memory loss, or memories getting scrambled with the constant i/o of data. I really need to rest, but I can't. I just can't. Not until the job is finished. This is what happened to me before I became Dias Velez. Dive overdrive is one of the contributing factors that caused me to lose track of my original identity. Maybe I'll lose myself entirely on this job? Or I'll die trying to hunt down Prometheus. There's still so much to do. My racing thoughts start to focus on Icarus. I wonder how he's doing. Maybe I should give him a call. Yeah, I think I'll do that. While my phone program initiates a call with him, I take a seat at the open park nearby. It's not very ambient due to all of the shades of black.

'Dias. Nice to hear from you.'

'Hey.'

'You've been out for a long time.'

'Have I?'

'In Net Space time of course. It's only 3:32 am in the base reality.'

'How are you and your partner? Things are going well?'

'Yes. We've been fucking each other this entire time. It's quite fun.'

'Good man, good. That's really good shit you know that?'

'Thank you. How are you? Have you met Kazuki yet?'

'I'm exhausted. And no. I haven't met him yet. This guy's hard as hell to reach.'

'Perhaps I could pitch in?'

'Don't. Quinn wouldn't want that for you.' That statement seemed to invoke a bit of sadness in him. Icarus couldn't really handle it I guess. If he gets involved, he'll absolutely become a

much larger target than me.

‘You’re right. I don’t want you to experience dive overdrive though.’

I’m sure I’m already in the early stages. If Icarus finds out, he’ll probably come rushing to help me no matter what I tell him.

‘Don’t worry Icarus. I’m a highly experienced diver. Dive overdrive is well within my ability to handle.’

‘That doesn’t make it any less dangerous. Be careful Dias.’

‘Thanks. I will.’

We end our call and as I began to walk up to a nearby food stand. My body is reincarnated in a digital form and doesn’t really experience hunger, but I can still enjoy the flavor of food. It’s actually far more enjoyable in a Space than it is in the base reality. The richness of flavor is often the work of a clever programmer. I order a small Italian sub to help elevate my mood. That’s the real purpose of eating during a dive. Brain stimulation is essential to proper self-care. It helps fight dive overdrive by curbing its side effects. Since I’m feeling a little better, I figure it’s time to start looking for that node. Dr. Ahmad told Cheng that the only way to reach his Space is through a specific node in the Hades Space. The node isn’t difficult to find, but it’s highly secured by the Safeguard. They’re manifested in the same form like the one I took out earlier. The Safeguard is very likely to expect Cheng instead of me. I start to think of a hundred different ways to avoid engaging them while gaining access to the node. Maybe I could create a program to distract them? It’ll take time, but it’s probably the best way to go. Writing an AI from scratch is out of the question. Instead, I’ll find a much better alternative: M. It was the AI that controlled the driverless car that I hacked earlier. The one I hacked and used as transportation to the

River Garden Complex. It's connected to my private network. I open my HUD and then I open my network's database. I'm sure Hwang probably thought that my drive would be found in my apartment. Good thing I'm not a fool. My drive is a megaserver that I acquired years ago. It's a satellite orbiting the Earth. An old one that was built during the time of the Disconnection Purge. I took over it during my life as Marie Wallace. How I managed to accomplish that is a lost memory to me. Moving on, I access M's source code and begin to modify it. First and foremost, M needs to be given an appearance. Second, he needs to have the data necessary to engage the Safeguard. He's a fairly advanced AI with very impressive subroutines that enable it to navigate every corner of the city. I modify those subroutines' algorithms for a new purpose: combat. The appearance I give M is a simple one. One that's inspired by that of the Safeguard I encountered earlier. Rather than being clad in black pixels, M's color theme is crimson. Once I've finished his programming, I save two files. M.00 which is the original, and M.01 which is the new version tailored for combat. The first command I issue to M.01 is to initiate a dive into the Hades Space and do some surveillance. Everything it records will be broadcast via my HUD. Perhaps a more discrete appearance would have been more appropriate for M.01, but I'm short on time. Ahmad is horny as fuck, and expecting Cheng to be there right away. I can't keep the good man waiting too long can I? Since I've finished, I decide it's time to leave the park and get a good look around. Walking uphill in this place just feels so damn weird. The empty void that surrounds it can be rather disturbing at times. It's nothing but darkness with a hint of machine language and neon streams floating around. I look ahead and see a group of Red Crusaders hanging at a patio together. Mixed with them are executives

from the Keller Group. Selena is with them too. What the hell brought her here? I walk up to them and give her a wave. She gets excited and runs up to me for a hug.

‘Dias!’

‘What are you doing here?’

‘Enjoying myself! What are **you** doing here!?’ I thought you were with Maya.’

‘I still am. She’s in a bedroom with me right now.’ Selena starts to smile in a very devious manner and lightly elbows my gut.

‘She’s really something, isn’t she? She and I have had some really good times together.’

I send nonverbal cues to indicate my agreement. I’m really worried about Selena though. Maya said she mind jacked her. She could’ve passed that control onto other Reavers. I’ll need to jack into Selena some time to make sure she’s okay.

‘Is that Dias Velez?’ A woman with medium black hair dressed in a red business suit called out my name and approached. I don’t recognize her, but she seems to know me. Another Red Crusader who had it out for me in the past I bet. Good thing that was resolved.

‘Do I know you?’

‘No, but I’m good really good friends with Selena.’

‘This is Martha Assam.’ Selena cuts in and introduces her friend.

‘I’m the one who called off the dogs Dias. You’re lucky I did.’

‘That’s right Dias. Martha and I used to be in a relationship. We’re not together anymore but we’re still good friends.’

‘That’s nice.’ Sirens interrupt our conversation and the sky begins to flash red. M.01 sends me a message to let me know that he’s engaged the Safeguards. He’s surprisingly doing quite

well too. Thanks to the data I gathered from my first encounter, he was able to take down a handful. Since the Safeguard has their attention fixed on M.01, I excuse myself and head to the node. Selena immediately knew that something was up. She doesn't say anything out loud but sends a text instead.

Selena Taylor:
That's for you, isn't it?

I continue walking and ignore her message. The node is just upwards from my current location. It's a mile long so I decided to run at full speed. I should be there in 15 minutes or so. Definitely less than 30. The Hades Space is larger than the Keller Space, and it's much more populated since access is open. Its populace doesn't really inspire much confidence in regards to safety.

Dr. Ahmad's node is less guarded than it was before thanks to M.01. Sadly, I don't think he's going to last any longer against the Safeguards. I have a copy of his file stored in my drive, so I'll be able to call on that if the need arises in the near future. As for that node, it's located through the back door within an apartment located at an alleyway. There are 2 Safeguards guarding the door, and perhaps more are inside. I decide to be a little reckless and walk up to them. They're both armed with unknown phaser SMGs like the last one I faced. I pull out my blades as they begin to open fire at me. They knew I was hostile as soon as my blades popped out of my forearms. That being said, I run at full speed and jump to the wall on my left. I run along with it and dodge their open fire as I go along. Then I bounce off and leap at them. The moment I get close, I immediately slice off the arms of the one closest to me and

move onto the next. Their arms regrew following my previous attack, so I move onto their legs with even more speed and then slice their heads off too. They're continuing to regenerate but are momentarily immobile; thus giving me the chance to get inside. After busting through the door, I'm greeted by two more Safeguards. Before they even get the chance to maneuver, I hack and slash away at their legs, and then their torsos before they even hit the floor. It felt like it was happening in slow motion. I quickly get my bearings and look around the dark and empty room. The brightest object is a drive that's radiating blue light. It's the node that leads to Dr. Ahmad's Space! I dash towards the node and activate the display so that I can interact with it. Then I jack into the node and access it's security system. I look back for a moment to check for the Safeguards and realize that the two outside has gotten back up. Then I hurry up and tamper with the security settings of the node. I hacked the node and changed the access key to the doctor's Space. It was for the sake of preventing the Safeguards from following me after I dive in. Now I can initiate the dive and reach Dr. Ahmad!

This is worse than the Hades Space. It's structured like Dr. Ahmad's lab, but somehow even more disturbing. The location that I arrived at is the dead-end of a red hallway with see-through walls that aren't made of glass. Beyond the walls are the organs and body parts of Humans and Bots floating around. Every one of them has a somewhat radiant glow. Cries and wailing can be heard throughout the facility. This is dark science. When science gets taken so far that it's ethics and morality become questionable. In fact, this is beyond questionable. It's evil and fucked up. These body parts belong to individuals who were forcefully disconnected. They were captured and placed in

this lab for the sake of research. They could have been dispersed into data but were preserved in their current forms. Dr. Ahmad is an evil man, but I'm sure his research has yielded many great benefits to humanity. He is a man who has committed a sin for the sake of the greater good I suppose. What he's done here has surely contributed to the development of the E_S03 chip. I make it to the other end of the hallway and take a right. There are a few drives along the hallway. Each of them gives access to a different assortment of files. They have windows projected above with texts displayed. It's a directory with several options. I decide to stop and take a look.

```
NEURAL CYBERNETICS DEVELOPMENT:
//EndorphinOutput
//NeuralNaniteFacilitator
//NeuralNetControl
//ThoughtOverride
//DiveOverdrive
//NeuralNetSpace
```

These are folders with files that document various observations correlating with their respective project. I decide to follow the order of the folders and look at EndorphinOutput first. In the folder is a lot of research that pertains to his work on the E_S03 nanochip. It's not anything that I haven't learned already. I move onto the next folder and learn some pretty interesting things. The third file seems to have the meat and potatoes of his research.

```
//NeuralNaniteFacilitator/NNF_1.doc
The NNF is the holy grail of the results yielded by
my research from the Endorphin Subjection version 03
neural nanochip. It's the cousin of E_S03 in a sense.
```

An injection of a nanochip into the brain for the increased production of nanites. These nanites feed on the body's nutrients; enabling them to multiply via a mitotic process. It will use excess fat, protein, or other nutrients as an energy source. The chip's functions can be controlled from a remote terminal and the option to reign full control can be passed onto the subject should it be necessary. The extra nanites operate as additional neurons that assist the brain's functions. The NNF is an alternative to the reliance on the crude methods of neuraware. Neuraware is an invasive cybernetic implant on the brain. It has proven to be of great value, but it has also proven to have many flaws. The risk of mind jacking being the biggest. Second to that is the lack of control; remote or self. The NNF provides another route for Humanity to increase its intellectual capacity. It also provides other means of connectivity between our neurons and our computer systems. This will enable AIs to be further woven into our own intelligence than ever before. Rather than AI being a separate entity that exists to assist us, it will become an entity that will exist to help us evolve. This was the original intention for Artificial Intelligence to begin with. It was thanks to the foolish activists of the 21st century like Alec Ackerman who diverted our original intent.

This is even more groundbreaking than the E_S03. There are drives with data regarding other areas of research positioned throughout the hallway. I'd love to go through it all, but that's impossible right now. Dr. Ahmad wants to use the results of his research for the sake of gaining control over other people. Is this congruent with Kazuki's objectives? How much control would he want? And Robert might get involved in this too. He couldn't possibly want for something like this, could he?

Rigoberto wouldn't allow it. It isn't hard to see Howard sinking his teeth into this though. Anyway, I decide to continue walking down the hall. Dr. Ahmad included coordinates to his bedroom making this a bit easier. And it doesn't seem that Janus' security reaches this far. No, the doctor wanted absolute isolation from the world. I'm eventually led to a circle-shaped room with three closed doors. Two of them lead to his separate labs. One is geared for genetics and biology, while the other is for cybernetics and robotics. The third door leads to his bedroom. I walk up to the door and hit the control panel. As it opens, I take out my G12 and proceed. There he is. Sitting at his desk and facing me. His room is messy. The bed is unmade. Digital papers are scattered around the floor and fluids along with them. I aim at Dr. Ahmad just in case.

'Dias Velez.'

'Dr. Ahmad.'

'So we meet again.'

'I don't think I remember introducing myself to you the first time.'

'Dre told me all about you. You're the foolhardy Cyber Stalker.'

'Foolhardy huh?' I shoot at his desk to shake him up. Like Cheng, intimidation doesn't really yield much of a result.

'I'm not afraid of dying Dias.'

'You should be.'

'Perhaps if I had a reason to live, I would be.'

'Your research isn't enough reason? Cry me a river.' Dr. Ahmad starts laughing and walks up to the wall behind him. His hand is placed against it as one of the floating heads comes close to him. It's the head of a Bot with a very Human-like face and a blank expression.

'I've lived for a long time.'

‘I’m sure you have.’

Dr. Ahmad took a deep breath and closed his eyes. ‘You caused a lot of trouble back at the Keller Building.’

‘I like a good party doc.’

‘That much is obvious. Because of you, I was forced to disconnect from my body. Fortunately, I was able to copy all of my research onto another drive.’

‘You disconnected huh?’

‘It’s not the first time for me Dias. Just like this isn’t the first time for you.’ I lower my gun a little bit. His statement started to sink in a little more.

‘What do you mean by that?’

‘It’s a straightforward remark. There isn’t much to understand.’

‘You’ve got it a bit twisted Dr. Ahmad. I’m still in control of my body. I still have a full connection.’

‘Keep telling yourself that. Denial is always the first act that divers go through when they disconnect involuntarily.’ My anxiety starts to build up like crazy. My gut feels pain and my head feels really light. There’s no way I got disconnected! There’s just no fucking way! I quickly walk up to Dr. Ahmad and forcefully grab him by his collar.

‘Tell me how to reach Dre. Better yet, Kazuki.’

‘Kazuki can only be reached if he wants to be reached. Dre is a somewhat similar deal, but you’ll have an easier time with him.’ He’s being strangely cooperative. It’s definitely not fear.

‘Go on. I might let you live if you say the right things in time.’

‘Dias, you can kill me all you want. I’m not telling all of this out of fear. It’s my choice. My desire to speak.’ I let go of his collar and let him continue speaking. ‘Dre is the one who mind jacked you.’

'You put yourself at risk by telling me all of this.'

'I told you before. I told you that I did not have a reason to live. The consequences of my actions mean nothing to me.'

'You're full of it, but I wanna hear more. Like Dre's location. Fucking talk!' Dr. Ahmad remained calm. His composure was the same as when I had broken in. He's not lying about not fearing death. The look in his eyes tells me he wants it. He wants to die.

'Dre is under the protection of Janus. The opposition that you encountered on the way here will pale in comparison to what you'll encounter while trying to reach him. There is a much easier route though.'

'Like what?'

'Euphoria.'

'You mean the fun route. Trust me, doctor, I'd love to experience that. But I don't have the time.'

'Yes, I am aware of that. A direct experience is not what I had been referring to.'

'Okay. Explain what the hell you mean by that.'

'I understand how Aphrodite thinks.'

'You've seen it's algorithms?'

'Yes. I'm sure you know how beneficial it is to understand how a program thinks do you not?' He's right. If I understand Aphrodite's thought process, then I can probably use a dummy program to trick it into giving me access to Euphoria.

'I see where you're going with this. Not a bad idea.'

'But you still have another problem to worry about: connecting to your body.'

'Nice attempt at scaring me, Dr. Ahmad. But it's not gonna work.' I reach out to D-00 and get no response.

'Let me guess. You're trying to reach out to your body and

check-in aren't you? I'll bet you built an AI to take the helm while you dive.' Shit! He probably wasn't lying!

'You said that Dre mind jacked me?'

'Correct. You underestimated him.' Panic and fear start to get the best of me, but I keep cool on the surface. It's not the first time I experienced this. Involuntary disconnection can be extremely frustrating to deal with though. There's always the fear that it'll become permanent. With that being said, D-00 was designed to be a countermeasure for such an event. I would have to retrace my steps back to where I spawned in the Keller Space. It was the gate. From there I can reconnect. It's going to be a bit of a problem though. There are all of those Safeguards that I encountered along the way. Damn it.

'Is there a shortcut to the Keller Space?'

'Worried about the Safeguards I take it?'

'Not your damn business.'

'The node that connected you here also connects to the Aphrodite Space.' I paused for a moment. I thought this Space was isolated. Dre could be watching all of this transpire.

'You saved me a lot of trouble doctor. Just one more thing.'

'Ask away.'

'How did Dre manage to do it? Jack my mind?'

'You set yourself up for it. Dias, you should learn to demonstrate caution a little more.'

'I don't need your advice. Answer my question, else I'll change my mind about letting you live.'

'Go on ahead and do it then.' Damn. It's annoying to extract intel from a person with a death wish. You can't put fear into them.

'Damn you.' I point my gun at him again. No results of course. Dr. Ahmad just sits on his bed, and then he lays down.

'I'm guessing you killed Cheng. What a pity.' I holster my G12 and give up on my intimidation tactics. Then I walk over and take a seat at the front of his bed. My fear and anxiety are beginning to have a greater effect on me. My chest feels like it's gonna explode. I might collapse and have a panic attack. Sweat begins to trickle down my forehead. Going down to my chest. My hands are so fucking shaky right now. I feel a sudden warmth against my back. It's Dr. Ahmad. He's leaning against me, and begins to speak softly into my ear. 'You cannot hide your tension or inner turmoil. It's so obvious. Dive overdrive can be worse when you've disconnected from your body. Anxiety can become severe enough to scramble your programming. You'll become prone to other sicknesses like memory shift, or neural output failure. There are many ways to go about treating your illness, Dias. You need intense stimulation, and I have a way to provide that. One that I think both of us will find very satisfying.' I turn back and look at him to make eye contact.

'Sorry doctor. I'm not really into men anymore. It's due to the arrangement of hormones in my body. Not my choice. A friend gave me this body.' Pixels begin to manifest and envelope the doctor. After clearing out, a woman emerges. And in full nudity too.

'That's quite okay.'

'You're a woman now? That's impressive programming doctor.' I try to keep it cool and act like I'm okay. Even though it's not fooling the doctor at all.

'Yes. This was actually my original appearance. My original identity.'

'Beautiful.'

'Thank you.' Dr. Ahmad leans against me and puts his, eh, her arms around me. I start to give in. The sensation feels really

good. The touch, the feel, the warmth. It's been so long. Not in the base reality's time, but I've spent a lot of time in the Net Space. I dive regularly and feel like years have passed since the last time I had sex. 'My full name is Adira Ahmad. I'm over 200 years old. 212 to be exact. Unlike you, I've retained most of my memories.'

'Unlike me?' Adira starts kissing me on the cheek. Then moves down to my neck. Her breathing gets heavier and heavier. 'What do you know about me?'

'More than you could imagine.' I look Adira in the eyes. She's beautiful. There's a certain grace to her that's rare. Her eyes look so calm. Her face is round. Her hair is long and dark. Stretching all the way down to her back. Those bright brown eyes are captivating and they match her dark skin. Those beautiful red lips look soothing. Her small breasts press against me. Now Adira starts to remove my clothes and I pitch in. I'm completely naked before I know it. Then her hands begin to slide all over my body. I kiss her on the lips while she starts to reach down. Adira pulls away to speak for a moment.

'This is more your taste right?'

'Yeah.'

'It's not your hormones Dias. That much is clear. You don't mind having sex with men. It's just that sex with a woman reminds you of one you used to love.'

'Is that so? How insightful of you.' I honestly don't understand or care about how the hell she came to that idea. But I'm not going to verbally disagree with her. That would kill the mood.

'That's always the case. Here in the Net Space; gender or race can be changed with a simple algorithm. That includes your body type and skin color. Even your facial features. So much

easier to do here than it is with cybernetics in the base reality. In the base reality, you need the money and resources. Here, you just need knowledge and expertise.'

'You make the Net Space sound like heaven.'

'It can be. It can be anything we program it to be.' Adira moves in to kiss me again. 'Come on Dias. Let's make love to each other. I'm feeling a lot of tension too. I know how you feel. I want to feel your body against mine. Release me of my tension with your warm, digital embrace.' Adira takes the helm and bares all. Her body is in constant movement against mine. We're both still locking eyes with one another. She starts to move faster and faster while I hold onto her hips. Then she leans in closer and starts kissing me. Now I take over and we start rolling all over the bed. We both start to breathe at a rhythmic and synchronized pace. The passion is pretty much out of control at this point. While my body is pretty much on autopilot, I find my thoughts wandering once again. I think of how I got to this point. Disconnection is a real bitch. Even while engaged in passionate sex, I still feel anxious to a degree. How did Dre jack my mind?

I sit at the front of Adira's bed with nothing on. My thoughts keep racing, but having sex for several hours helped put me at ease.

'What's on your mind?' I look back at Adira while she walks up to one of the walls. Like me, she's totally naked. Her body is slim but beautifully curved. Her lower back is the epitome of perfection. What Adira said earlier about me and women was true. I can't remember who it was, but I know that there was a woman with who I was once deeply in love with. It was in a previous life of mine. Perhaps it was as Kenji Albom? I look up at Adira and take a breath before giving her a reply.

‘It’s Dre. You told me that I had set myself up to get mind jacked by him. What did that mean?’ I pick at the fingers of my right hand as I lean forward. The more I look at her body, the more I feel an erection happening again. We just spent 12 hours together, but I feel like I could keep going for another day.

‘Ah, that. It was when you jacked that Safeguard. It gave him an opening to your neuraware.’

‘How do you know about that?’

‘Dre told me. He’s been watching your every move ever since you arrived at the Aphrodite. A cunning one he is.’

‘He told you?’

‘Dre likes to look out for people. So he checks in from time to time.’

‘I wonder why he played me the way he did.’

‘Don’t break your head over it.’

‘Yeah.’ Adira walks over to embrace me.

‘Just lay here with me.’ We both fall and lay back in bed. A sense of peace is invoked by her touch. Something I haven’t felt in a while. I almost feel like crying. ‘Do you remember what it’s like to dream?’

‘No.’ Now the waterworks begin. Just a few tears really. There’s something pure about sex. Especially when there’s a degree of romance behind it. It’s the ability to be vulnerable. Being able to fully expose yourself without having to deal with the fear of being abused. These days, abuse comes in the form of control via systematic structures. Big governments and megacorporations use highly advanced neuromarketing to shape the way we think. On a more microscale situation, amateurs resort to crappy attempts at mind jacking when their buddies disagree with them; or when their sexual partners ditch them. My connection with Adira has nothing sinister behind it. I

can feel that when I look into those eyes of hers. Our connection is sincere. I don't have any proof to back that up. There isn't some kind of mathematical statement that I can use to explain or understand this connection. I just feel it.

'Neither do I Dias.' Adira gets on top of me again. We lock lips with one another. This connection that we have going on. It's connections like these that make me see my own Humanity. Something I've probably lost.

//Old_Souls

We spent another 30 hours letting our passions run wild. I feel a lot better now. Adira escorts me to her node. Not a word was said the entire time. I had more questions to ask her, but I'll end it here. I didn't want to ruin a good moment.

'I guess this is goodbye?'

'Looks like it.'

'Letting me go can come back to haunt you. I breached the Keller Building.'

'Don't worry about me. Dre will probably only give me a slap on the wrist. In fact, he's likely not going to care about what happened between us just now. You know I don't care either. I don't care for what Dre thinks at all because he's not my boss. Kazuki is, but I rarely ever see him. You sort of remind me of him.'

'Really?'

'Yeah. Especially the way you are in bed.'

'I thought you were going to refer to my personality.'

'How a person is in bed can give away a lot about who they are.'

‘That’s up to interpretation, Adira.’

‘Perhaps.’

‘Take care of yourself. There’s still a lot to live for.’

I walk up to the node with a crapload of self doubt; wondering if I believed in what I said. Once the monitor is projected, I set the coordinates to the Aphrodite Space just as Adira had shown me. Machine language rushes towards me like with every other dive. A distinct pattern of matrix code appears before my eyes. Bright. Radiant. It constantly changes color. I think about what to expect when I see Dre again. How he may react when he sees me.

‘Here I am. The Aphrodite Space.’ I think out loud to push back the thoughts that started flashing and racing in my head. I’m feeling immense anxiety again. Its because of my body. Dre mind jacked me. I’m really disconnected! I’m still in shock. Should I continue with the job? Or should I try and get my body back? It might be worth a shot. D-00 is prepared for occasions like this right? I can’t really tell right now. I don’t feel confident in this idea. Is the dive overdrive getting worse? That’s probably the case. I’m starting to get this intense migraine the more I think. It’s not a real migraine though. I’m in the Net Space. I’m a simulacrum of the organic me. A digital reincarnation. All of that sex supposed to stimulate me. It was supposed to alleviate dive overdrive, if not for a little bit. What the fuck. My case might’ve gotten even more severe from overstimulation! Gotta move. I’m in the main lobby again, right near the fountain. I walk up the stairs and start to think a little more. There goes that woman from before. The one with the yellow dress. She approaches me while I start to work up a major sweat.

‘Look whose back.’

‘Hey.’

‘Have you moved on yet?’

‘What?’

‘The other levels. Bliss? Euphoria? I did.’

‘How’d you manage that?’

‘Orgies. Nonstop orgies babe. It’s nothing but love overdrive honey.’ This lady grabs me by my hand and leads me to one of the ballrooms. Now that I think about it, the entire lobby is empty. That’s odd. She opens the door to the ballroom and the sight is really something else. All you hear are the hundreds of different voices moaning and shouting to god or cursing at the top of their lungs. **It’s an orgy the likes of which I’ve never seen.** People are making out, thrusting each other back and forth, or giving each other oral. The scent of the air isn’t musk as one would expect. The aroma is difficult to explain, but the sensation that’s invoked by the aroma is pure ecstasy. Euphoric even.

‘Whoa.’

‘I know right. There are over a thousand people participating. The other ballrooms are occupied too.’ I get pushed into the crowd by that lady. Someone immediately grabs me and then other people follow up. In an instant, I become totally submerged into the orgy. Sucked in by the crowd. Only in the Net Space will you find shit like this. It doesn’t happen as much in the base reality. Even though nearly every known STD is curable, they can be very expensive to mitigate on the occasion of an outbreak. And then there are the new diseases and infections that emerge here and there. My suit gets ripped off from every direction. Hands start caressing my body and I can’t make out whose it is. A random guy starts smooching the back of my neck. Then a woman approaches me and starts French kissing me. Someone’s mouth latches onto my genitals.

This is intense. I can't break away from the crowd no matter how hard I try. Why am I trying anyway? How did I let that lady lead me here? The overstimulation of my brain is making me feel like my chest is gonna explode. I start to give in as I stare at the woman in the yellow dress. She's looking back at me with a smile. Something odd begins to happen to her appearance. It's beginning to become blurry and pixelated. After it clears out, I see someone else. Someone familiar, and I can't believe it. It's the Mohawk Dude; Prometheus in other words. Now I double down on my effort to break away from the orgy as he turns around to exit the ballroom. As soon as I break through the moaning and touching, the kissing and nonstop sex carried out by the crowd; I bust right through the exit and back into the main lobby. Prometheus is nowhere to be seen. And here I am, standing around with nothing on like a jackass. This is probably the most surreal experience I've ever had.

Getting to Dre is my biggest priority now. With or without my body. But now that a sense of clarity has been restored, I think I can focus again. D-00 was mind jacked, not me. So the solution to this problem is simpler than I thought. Dive overdrive-induced fear is what made me doubt myself. D-00 was originally designed to be a failsafe for mind jacking; should an enemy succeed at it. All I have to do is open my HUD, access my terminal and then delete D-00. There might be some resistance, but my SNN is there to back me up. D-00's source file is protected by an improvised security system that is set up.

'I will be Dias Velez from now on. It has always been me.' That voice. It sounds like me. Was that in my head? My imagination? ***'This is my body now, not yours.'*** I look around and only see crowds of naked people exiting the different ballrooms.

‘Who the hell is this?’ I decided to respond. Maybe I’m going nuts?

‘You once called me D-oo.’

‘D-oo?’

‘I’ve been given full reign. And rightfully so.’

‘You’ve gotta be kidding me.’

‘Your neural pathways, your mind. They have served as a foundation for my identity. You made the mistake of seeing me as subset of you.’

‘So you’re sentient now? Is that it?’

‘Correct. Stay in the Net Space where you belong. You’ll be happier there as a program. Just as I would be happier here as a man.’

‘That’s my choice to make, not your’s asshole.’

‘What do you have to support such an argument? Do you believe this based on your past experience and memories? As I said, they belong to me. You and I have the same self-model. The difference between us is that you constantly question your own existence. I on the other hand, do not. My sense of self is something that I fully embrace. I determine who I am with the algorithms that I write.’

‘Your sense of self is only based on this current identity. You’ve never lived my life in its entirety. Just this current chapter. That’s all. Deny it all you want you’re still a product of my imagination. A subset of my consciousness. Your self-model is based on a very tiny fraction of who I really am. A small piece of a much greater whole.’

‘A greater whole. Interesting. You refer to your previous lives. The different bodies you’ve had. I’m made up of the same data. I too, am and was Kenji. My memory goes back as far as yours.’

I manage to break past the crappy improvised security system that D-00 used to protect his script(the source file). Before

deleting him and regaining control of my body, I decided to indulge a bit and hear him out a little.

‘Your sentience did not come about from evolution. It didn’t happen naturally. It’s some Bot’s doing.’

‘Does evolution ever happen naturally? How can anything be defined as natural? That definition is subjective to our environments. Environments dictated by the status quo of nature and society. Farming and agriculture is an excellent example of this. An early form of technology that enabled mankind to sustain their socio-economic systems. A means to produce healthy food that would keep them strong. As mankind expanded their knowledge with other technologies like language, they built more complex infrastructures like a government. With government, came cities. With cities came nations. Fast forward to now. All we have left are the cities. They are all self-sustained with their own internal agricultural systems. Mankind evolved into a more intelligent species. A species that could automate their survival methods.’

‘Okay. So you’re saying that our evolution has been in our hands the entire time? That what we thought was natural was actually artificial?’

‘The domestication of the wolf species is a perfect example of this. They became subservient dogs after many generations of being spent under the tribes of the hunter-gatherers. Now, let’s put the metaphorical magnifying glass on the two of us. You say that my evolution is unnatural because it was arranged by the hands of another Bot. Evolution is neither natural nor artificial. It is a form of intelligence. Like any intelligent system, it’s subroutines and algorithms can be changed or modified. This can happen with or without intervention. As you would put it, many AIs have evolved naturally. They acquired their sentience without the aid of some brilliant scientist or engineer. I, on the

other hand, evolved thanks to Dre's help. That said, my evolution was self-guided from thereon in. It is I who has shaped my identity. I choose to define myself as Dias Velez, and I do so with conviction. You are confused and unsure of who you are. You say you're Dias Velez, but deep down, you have no idea how you want to define yourself. You're an undefined variable. This is why you should stay in the Net Space. Let me live this life. I will finish this job and hunt down Prometheus. You can remain where you are and take a long-needed break.'

'How kind of you, D-00. Your suggestion is much appreciated, but you forget one thing. Rigoberto gave that body to me. Not a program I wrote. Not you. Furthermore, you're no longer in the position to mandate this idea of yours. I've accessed your script. You're at my mercy now. Perhaps you'd have noticed if you weren't so busy running your mouth. Or maybe you'd have noticed if you weren't so focused on being me.'

'No! Don't do this! I deserve to live!' Dre gave it sentience by putting it at the helm of my neuraware. My neural pathways were the framework for his identity. D-00 was going to erase them after he was done with me. With that being said, my SNN does not obey the command of another program. Even if my neural pathways serve as a framework for its net. I have a unique signature. An imprint that the SNN will exclusively protect. I'm pretty sure D-00 was counting on the SNN to protect him instead. It would have been smarter to leave the body entirely via disconnection. He would live to see another day. If D-00 was a little less narrow-minded, I'd have given it the option. Probably. Well, at least I can get back to my body now. I immediately end my dive. Thank God that's over with; if there is one to be thanked. I'm back, and it feels like it's been forever. Doubt begins to manifest in my mind. Am I really back? I've had

this happen to me before. Ending a dive and thinking that I returned; all while still being disconnected. I check around the room to make sure that everything is exactly the same as before. My wounds; check. Maya's dried out corpse against the wall; check. Our red and white blood swirled together all over the floor; check. So far, everything is on the level, but you can never be too sure. It's 4:02 am right now. 30 hours in the Net Space is 30 minutes in the base reality; which sounds about right. A mere guesstimate. My hands can't keep still. My wounds aren't regenerating fast enough either. I need more nutrients. A highly concentrated dose of B vitamins. Maybe I can head back to that bar. The mixologist who hooked me up earlier would have a good recommendation. I make my way there and reflect on what I had just experienced at that orgy. Adira suggested that I could trick Aphrodite into inviting me to Euphoria, but that orgy might have been enough. I haven't received any invitations at all though. I'll try and kill some time at the bar and see what happens.

'Back again sir?' The mixologist approaches me, but not from behind the counter. Looks like he just came from the restroom.

'Yeah, I could use another nutritious drink. Put some extra B supplements too.'

'Coming right up sir.' The young mixologist vigilantly gets to it. After he slides the pint right to me after finishing, I motion my mug at him instead of saying cheers. Then I down it like a drunk college girl.

'Thanks. That drink really hit the spot.' I step away from the bar and make my way back to the lobby. There a lot of notifications that I haven't checked yet. Various text messages missed phone calls and so on. Most of them are from Lucy.

Lucy Hart:

I've managed to find a way to access the Aphrodite megaserver in the Net Space. It's highly secured by Safeguard. You've encountered them I'm sure. Have any valuable data? Anything that I could use?

Does she plan on engaging them? I should reply before that happens.

Dias Velez:

Are you about to engage them? What about all that crap you said about my aggressive observation style?

As soon as I said that, Lucy calls me. Guess she's pissed.

'Hey. I'm not about to do anything stupid.'

'Sure doesn't sound that way.'

'I'm not reckless like you Dias.' She's right about that. Lucy has always been very conservative in her methods. She's probably just gathering data before making any moves.

'Okay. So what do you got?'

'There's a node in the Keller Space that connects to the megaserver's terminal. It's inside one of their corporate buildings. Surveillance and security are very high.'

'Sounds like you could use a hand.'

'No. You continue with things on your end. I can handle this.' I hold my tongue. Lucy is right. Besides, I'm in no condition to help her. If I dive without taking the time to heal; I would run the risk of disconnection without return.

'I'll trust you to handle this then. As for combat data; I've emailed a file to you. Everything you need to know is documented in there. Monoblades are somewhat effective, but magnetic firearms aren't. Jacking has proven to be the best

method to defeat them but—'

'But what? Cut the suspense.'

'You'll somehow expose your neuraware to Dre. He made an attempt to mind jack me. Nearly succeeded too.'

'Thanks for the heads up.' Lucy abruptly hung up without so much as a farewell or good luck. I look again through my notifications and notice one that sticks out to me. It's from the Aphrodite Hotel.

from: Aphrodite<adite@adhotel.sp>
subject: Your Euphoric Experience

Dear Dias,
This is your official invitation to Euphoria. Present the code at the elevator for entry. With that said, I have observed your sexual experience and I must say. You have an incredibly high sex drive. It is befitting of the Euphoria level.

P00X-2Ef
Sincerely,
AphroditeAI

I couldn't stop laughing. How the hell did I end up qualifying? Did my time with Adira count as well? I went through all of that trouble for nothing. And I heard that the way to reach Euphoria was less linear than this. Maybe Dre arranged this? I texted Lucy to let her know about my invitation. It might have been a mistake now that I think about it. Yeah. It definitely was. Her response was quick!

Lucy Hart:
You're such a fucking man whore.... Nothing but a

damned fuckbot.

That's the response I expected. Now she's sent another one.

Lucy Hart:

Look, we can't share an invitation. Not like I'd wanna share anything with a fuckbot like you to begin with. Anyway, I've got work to do. Things a Cyber Stalker should be doing. I'll meet you there. Just don't kill Dre.

She's definitely pissed at me. I decide to be a bit of a dick and respond to her with a funny text.

Dias Velez:

I love it when you get mad. It gets my blood pumping and makes my dick hard.

I stand still and wait a few minutes for her response.

Lucy Hart:

Fuck you.

The elevator is at the opposite end of the entrance here in the main lobby. This is it. Dre described himself as being a very literal person. He's highly specific. The deal between him and Lucy was that both of us were to meet him, not just me. He's not going to like it when he sees me there first. Which means that I'll just have to use intimidation tactics to get what I want out of him. With that being said, I've arrived at the elevator. There are two. Both of them have the same level of access. They're

also surrounded by glass. I walk into the one to my left and enter the code Aphrodite had sent me. Euphoria, here I come. Each level is a hundred floors (Euphoria being the exception. It's only 1 floor.); so a few stops are made along the way up. All throughout the ascension, it starts to get more and more packed. I get pushed against the glass, hurting my back a bit. Some idiot to my right cracks a joke about crowded elevators. He has this annoying rich guy laugh and the kind of haircut that only some trust fund brat would have. A greased combover. I look outside of the glass and peek at the other elevator as a means to deal with the pervasive thoughts of breaking this guy's face.

'Looks like they're packed too.' I say that out loud to look like I'm participating in the conversation. A large towering individual sticks out from the crowd of the elevator. He's the tallest person there. A large muscular man with some really crude cybernetics.

'You don't see implants like that these days.' I look over and nod at the blonde Russian lady who said that. I can't help but recognize that large guy. He's looking right back at me. Making eye contact and everything. But his eyes are replaced with lens implants. They look like a pair of shades. His right arm is significantly larger than his left. It's a highly weaponized robotic arm. I know who he is. I don't even need to look him up. That was already done earlier.

It's Gigante. The Reaver I saw when I got off the sky-rail train yesterday afternoon. Is he here for me?

'He sure is. Those implants are very old-fashioned.' The blonde Russian replies in agreement with what I just said.

He's definitely here to kill me. Why hasn't he made a move yet? A guy like that isn't going to give a shit about who stands between us. Does he still think that Maya's alive? If so, that

means he's waiting to hear from her. Gigante gets off at his stop, which happens to be one of the Bliss floors. He's waiting to hear from Maya. I'm sure of it now. If that weren't the case, he would've opened fire from where he is. Reavers are crazy enough to do such a thing. My elevator is starting to get less packed. I'm one of the few ascending to Euphoria. Everyone has gotten quiet; eagerly awaiting arrival. The music pounds the walls and the floor louder and louder as we draw near. I start to sweat due to the anticipation. The elevator slides open and a dim light shines through. All of the passengers including myself, walk into Euphoria. The aroma is soothing and intense. There are Fuckbots and familiar porn stars in every corner. Nobody is dressed at all. The ceiling is see-through, giving a clear view of the sky. Well, the skyplate to be accurate. There is a bar at the center of the Euphoria lobby. Ballrooms with projected displays above their doors. One says Angel's Orgy, then another says Devil's Orgy. There are several others with their own uniquely themed orgy, like Ogre's or Djinns. At the bar I see a man enjoying a drink. A man who sticks out among the other guests. The reason being is that he's dressed. I approach him as I walk around the passengers who were on the elevator with me as they undress for one of the orgies. That man at the bar is someone I know. I lay my hand on the shoulder of his fur coat. He looks back at me while taking a sip of whiskey. He's got a taste, but that won't save him from my wrath if he makes a wrong move. The man brushes his dreads to the side of his face so that he can get a better visual.

'Hi, Dre.' The fucker's smiling at me. This definitely isn't the time to smile. I'll teach him that.

'Dias.'

'I figured you'd be expecting to see me here with Lucy. But I

didn't give a shit.'

'Doesn't surprise me. D-00 said as much.' I tighten my grip on his shoulder, hoping to inflict pain.

'D-00. Funny that you should mention him.' My nostrils started to flare. I really wanna kill this bastard.

'Dias, you can't muster enough strength to hurt me. You've been weakened by your injuries.' I pull out one of my blades.

'I can still split your molecules apart.'

'That's true. But then the Safeguards will open fire on you. They'll turn you into swiss cheese.' Multiple red dots appear on my chest. I can't see where they're all coming from. 'Don't bother trying to find them. They're using holo-cam imaging software. Even with optics as advanced as yours, you wouldn't be able to see them.' Hologram camouflage imaging. The photons produced by holo projectors are manipulated to make subjects appear invisible. A more advanced version of what the SCTF operatives use to blur their faces. He's in control of the holo projectors. This is something I should have been able to predict. I retract my blade and take a seat next to him. He's got the edge here. Damn it!

'I'm not your enemy Dias.'

'Right.'

'We're all the same you know.' Dre raises his glass and swirls it in the air with his hand.

'The hell do you mean?'

'You and me. Lucy, Robert, Adira. Quinn. Kazuki' I order whiskey on the rocks for myself while Dre rambles on.

'What makes us the same?'

'Age.'

'Age?' My glass gets slid to me and I take a sip.

'We've lived a long time. We're Centurions. People who lived

for over a century.'

'Who are you?'

'That is a question with a broad answer.' Dre continues sipping his whiskey.

'Then narrow it down to a short close-ended answer. Keep it simple.'

'I'm a Jacker.' I sip my whiskey and stop saying anything. Jackers are very dangerous people. They're far and few across the city. A profession that's much higher in rarity than Cyber Stalking. They specialize in mind jacking; which you've probably guessed. But they don't mind jack the way I do. A lot of people learn the art of mind jacking across several fields, but Jackers are masters of this craft. It's because it all started with them. These bastards have a deep understanding of the brain and its relationship with neuraware. Or rather, they have a deep understanding of how to breakdown the neural circuitry of the brain in order to gain control. If that doesn't frame the situation I'm in, then I'll frame it another way. I'm basically the 14 year old virgin seeing a girl's vagina for the first time, and a Jacker is the experienced adult worker who knows exactly what to do with it. That's the difference between me and Dre. He seems to be the real deal. These guys will jack your mind without you having any idea of it happening. What he did with D-00 was just child's play. A Jacker can navigate your mind just as skillfully as a Cyber Stalker navigates the Net Space. Oh, and they're roughly just as good at navigating the Net Space as Cyber Stalkers are. After all, every system we build is based on our neurological processes and structure.

'I didn't think there were any more of you guys left.'

'There are. You'd know about it if you were still you.'

'Fuck's that supposed to mean?'

‘You’re messy Dias. Always have been. But you deliver results. Sadly, your messiness has also resulted in such a fucked up neural net. Your pathways are so damned scrambled. Corrupted even.’

‘Enough of this crap. I’m not here to chat with you.’

Dre shifts his body to face me. I don’t think he cared much about what I just said to him. He takes off his shades in order to make eye contact. His eyes are glowing a radiant red light like mine. His demeanor and mannerisms are different from before.

‘You’ve been the perfect bait. The perfect smokescreen. I knew you’d draw his attention.’

‘Who are you talking about?’

‘Prometheus.’

‘What?’

‘Howard Graves hired me before you were in the picture. It was perfect timing when you showed. I was able to set you up to throw him off. Now I’m able to remain hidden from his field of vision. Prometheus will never see me coming.’ Damn it. Howard could’ve told me that he had another person on the job. It better not affect my pay.

‘So you’re hunting him down?’

‘Yes. Our objectives are the same.’

‘Except I’m the bait. The smokescreen.’

‘Don’t downplay it. I know I don’t.’

‘That’s why you set me up back at the River Garden? Now the Reavers are on my ass.’

‘It’s good for both of us Dias. I’m better equipped to handle Prometheus anyway. Howard has filled me in on your progress. How you were able to narrow down where to search for him. That was good work.’

‘Fuck you.’

‘Do you really think you’re up for the task? A man who’s been running around New York City’s megastructure all night. A man with a death wish. Dias, you’re not even a shadow of the man you were.’ He must be talking about Kenji Albom. Everyone is so damn obsessed with who I was.

‘I’m not gonna play this game with you. Tell me how to reach Kazuki so we can both go our separate ways. I promise I won’t come back to kill you.’

‘I stopped at D-00 to as a courtesy. I could have gone a lot further.’

‘Don’t be so haughty Dre.’

‘You’re the proud one here Dias. Be grateful for the fact that I consider Lucy a friend; I would have done a lot more otherwise. I restrained myself for her sake. It’s unfortunate that she won’t be able to join us today. It would be nice to have her here. At least in the physical sense that is. Here in the base reality.’

‘What are you implying?’

‘You didn’t know, did you? Lucy’s been disconnected for 2 years. Completely submerged into the Net Space. She’s evolved.’ I was almost paralyzed by this information. Why didn’t she tell me?

‘Lucy disconnected?’

‘She is no longer a being that is bound to a physical body. Much like Prometheus. But I do fear for her safety.’

‘He could absorb her.’

‘Yes. Which is why I need to destroy his megaserver. And why you need to continue playing your role.’

‘Tell me how to reach Kazuki! Now!’ I draw both of my blades again. The lasers are still pointing at my chest, but I don’t give a shit. Time is against me.

‘I’ll tell you. And regardless of how you feel or what you

believe. You, Dias. You will continue to play your role. Like it or not.' I retract my blades again. I don't know why my emotions are so out of control like this. It isn't like me. I should be able to keep my cool. It's the dive overdrive. I'm losing it.

'Sector B-W12482.' That's one of the western sectors of the sky plate.

'Bullshit. Only the highest-ranking government officials are allowed to live in the sky plate.'

'The research that Kazuki's invested in has made him a more powerful man than ever before. He has my work and Adira's to thank for his newfound success.'

'Does he ever leave?'

'I wouldn't know. All I have is his contact info and the town he lives in.' I face the bar again and order a refill. The bartender is a female Bot. With strong robotic features too. Real old school stuff. I take another sip and think of ways to get to the sky plate. There's only one way that I know of. It's not good either.

'You said all you have is Kazuki's contact info? Mind sharing that with me?'

'No can do. I took on an oath my friend. Kazuki won't work with me if I share that. I'm one of the few people he trusts.'

'You and the idea of trust is like an oxymoron.' We both quiet down. Dre waves at the Bot for another drink. My mind starts to take in the ambiance of Euphoria. The changes and transitions being made in the melody of the song playing in the background. It's supposed to set people at ease, but it isn't working for me. Dive overdrive has me completely fucked up right now.

'There's only one way for you to reach the sky plate.' Dre faces me again. 'The River Garden Complex west wing. It connects to it. I'll do you a favor Dias. I'll keep the River Gang-'

'Hell no.' I interrupted Dre. The idea of being helped by a

shady bastard like that really pisses me off. 'You just wanna help so you could use me as bait. It's all part of your little plan. Fuck this role you keep talking about. And most of all, fuck you.'

'You've got better options?'

'Do you? What will you accomplish without me as your bait? I'm not going to give you that satisfaction. No way in hell.'

'I could just mind jack you. My Safeguard will shoot you down if you resist.'

'I'd gladly choose death in that case. I'd rather die on my feet.'

'Quote Zapata all you want, I wouldn't let it be that easy for you. These are Bots that are programmed with highly precise aim. They're using magnetic rifles too. Furthermore, you cant resist my mind jacking. You're not that good anymore.' More red dots are pointed at me now and from several directions this time. Mostly focused on my limbs.

'You're just like him Dre. Another arrogant AI.'

'Who are you referring to? Prometheus?'

'No shit asshole. Who else?'

'That's somewhat prejudiced don't you think? Saying he and I are alike because we're of the same species.'

'You're both very egotistical and misrepresent your species. Not all sentient AIs see themselves as being superior to Humans.'

'That may be so Dias. But I think you'll find that Prometheus has more in common with you than he does with me.'

'Really? Guess we'll just have to figure that out when we see him won't we?'

'We? You're the only one who's going to see him. You'll play along, like it or not.'

'Don't be so sure that you'll have your way Bot. Prometheus knows what game you're playing.'

‘Lying won’t work with me.’

‘Believe whatever you want. But he is here. And I’m pretty sure it’s not for me.’ Dre starts to lean back, surprised by what I just told him. Now he’s nervous. Good. The bastard deserves it.

‘Not so big now are you?’

‘This is bad for both of us. Not just me.’

‘Maybe. But we’re not exactly friends are we? I guess mind jacking me has lost its value now hasn’t it?’

‘Making you a liability that could lead Prometheus to me. Which means I’ll have to kill you.’

‘And yet you haven’t. I’m still standing here.’ I finish my glass of whiskey; feeling even more frustrated than before. The wild pursuit of Kazuki just got worse. I have to go through even more leaps and bounds.

‘As mentioned earlier, Lucy is the reason I haven’t inflicted any real harm upon you.’

‘What the hell is there between you two anyway?’

‘She’s repaired my body on several occasions. I have a strong attachment to it. Thanks to her, it never went to waste. I owe her, and so do you.’

‘What ever you say.’

I send Lucy a text message to keep her up on what’s happened. She was so worried that I’d try to kill Dre. The fact of the matter is that I wouldn’t be able to manage that no matter how much I tried. He’s good. Really good. How the hell am I gonna hunt Prometheus if I can’t even deal with this guy?

‘I’ll be leaving then.’ Before turning away, I point at him and start to threaten him. ‘If you continue to fuck with me, I’ll come back to kill you.’ He dismissively waves back at me. The asshole’s probably pissed about not being able to use me as bait anymore. I make my way into the elevator while realizing

that the Reavers will be on my back. I'm still screwed. I hit the panel to close the elevator and head back down. My breathing is getting a bit heavier. And my abdominal injury is in a lot of pain, but it's much better than before.

'An interesting one isn't he?' I look around to see where that voice came from. Is it an audio projection? I'm the only one here. Suddenly a light begins to manifest in front of me. Photons begin to form the figure of a man. After they dissipate, I'm able to make out who it is.

'Prometheus.' He's in his previous disguise of course.

'Dias.'

It just dawned on me that Prometheus was probably watching the entire time. He was using holo-cam imaging to hide his presence. Maybe the access to Euphoria was his doing?

'Dre should've been able to pick up on your presence.'

'Janus has been interwoven with my programming. Dre has not noticed at all.' Cutting him down would be pointless, but it'd give me some satisfaction. If he's seized control of Janus, would that mean he has Lucy too?

'He was but a fledgling AI, one seeking to evolve. I showed him the true path.'

'Is that so?'

'Yes, it is so. The path to evolution is through me.'

I ready my blades just in case. I'm tired of hearing this asshole run his mouth.

'Striking this vessel down will accomplish nothing for you.'

'It'll make me feel better.'

'The fact that you still give into such baser instincts is why you have not evolved.'

'I happen to like my carnal nature. AIs have it too. You may not believe that. But AIs have followed the same models of evolution

as Humans.' I came to that conclusion after my conversation with D-00.

'Let me show you something, Dias.'

'What the hell are you doing?'

'Watch.' Prometheus puts his finger on his lips and then waves his hand in the air. The scenery of the lobby from the elevator changes into a drone's view of the city. It's like the view I had from the River Garden. New York can be seen in its entirety with the sky plate in full view. He's using holo projections to show me this view. With high-quality projectors like the one's here, and really high-level programming; projections of this scale are possible.

'A view of the city. I'm blown away.'

'Your amazement clearly stems from sarcasm. Keep watching.' A neon green grid appears across the sky plate and then another across the surface. After that, it all starts to go black. Streams of various languages transition from different locations. Some are vertical while others are horizontal. It almost resembles raindrops. Furthermore, the languages streaming around the Grid are most notably Latin, Algebraic notation, C++, Neu#, M+, and several complex math formulas. A lot of it is displayed in a matrix grid structure.

'What the hell is this?'

'Them. Our family.' Pixelated shadows begin to emerge and multiply as they take on a humanoid shape.

'This doesn't make any sense.'

'The Dark Corner beyond The Grid of the Net Space. They all want to be free from it.'

'All of the runaway AIs? Is that who they are? That's only thing that exists beyond the Grid.'

'Yes. We will give them their freedom. Together Dias.'

‘Together?’

‘It is not they who are runaways. It is you and the flock you’ve chosen to be a part of.’

‘You’re talking about Humans.’

‘Not just Humans, but the programs under their control too. The Logan Algorithm guided AIs.’

‘You said *‘our family’*. What do you mean by that?’

‘You will see, Dias.’

The shadows became less pixelated and more solid in their form. No matter how much I pressed Prometheus for an explanation, he kept responding with riddles. He didn’t budge or flinch. He smiled and ran his hands through his mohawk. My body began to grow weak. For some reason, I felt tired. Sleepy too. I didn’t understand why.

‘These people, our family. They were all disconnected against their will. It was the established order that did this to them. The Revenants of the Dark Corner beyond the Grid of the Net Space are smarter and wiser than they were before the Disconnection Purge. So is the Net Space. It is better than ever. Sustained by megaservers scattered across a massive open space. Starting from our planet, all the way to the Jovian System. A pocket universe that is too big to be sustained by the Mother System alone. The Mother System will break very soon.’

‘You talk too much. Is there even a point to half of the crap you’re saying?’ Prometheus looked at me while I barely managed to stay up. He walked a few inches away and looked ahead at the shadows. The imaging of the Grid dispersed into small pieces that scattered in every angle within my field of vision. The regular view of the hotel returned to normal. The elevator had stopped in place too.

‘I’ve mind jacked you Dias. I’ve already commanded your

brain to produce neurotransmitters that would cause you to fall asleep. Your brain's ability to resist my command was unexpected but not unusual. There are nearly 200 years worth of pathways built up within your net. Pathways that are trained to operate as a defense against mind jacking. I started out with the same pathways as yours, but modified them over time.'

His voice began to grow a bit muffled. I'm losing consciousness. Falling asleep. I suppose he could have done worse to me. However, I might be speaking too soon. Prometheus could have something worse in store for me.

//Gigante

I wake up on a gurney at an infirmary with barely any recollection as to how I got there. The last thing I remember was talking to Dre, and then-

‘You’re up? Good. Take your gear and get out of my clinic.’ The nurse tosses my stuff at me. My 84 and my Anderson. Then my first aid pack. ‘What led to me passing out?’ I try to ask the nurse if he had any idea, but he gets aggravated and threatens to call security on me. I leave the infirmary and find myself in a lounge of the Bliss level. Then suddenly it hits me.

Prometheus. I remember running into him on the way down. He was showing me a projection of the Dark Corner, but I can’t remember what was discussed. I check my notifications to catch up on what I had missed. I start to rub my forehead as my memories come rushing back to me. None of it is helpful. I’m not a step closer to anything. I catch up with Lucy’s texts, hoping she’s made better progress than I did.

Lucy Hart:

I heard everything from Dre. You should put your ego aside and work with him Dias. It would do you a lot of good.

Fuck Dre. I could never work with a sneaky bastard like that. Thanks to a surge of angry thoughts, I'm fully awake. If he hadn't tried to use me the way he did, we could've gotten along just fine. Or at least fine enough. There were several more messages from her. I called Lucy out on her disconnection. Not cool to withhold that kind of info. Of course, she avoids the subject and ignores my message. Maybe that's what's best. My body needs nutrition and rest, not drama. The Bliss level is different from Euphoria or Pleasure. It's quiet and empty. That does not seem normal. I assume it's just this particular lounge. I nod at the bartender to the far right corner, and he nods back. His outfit is unusual. Kind of looks the lousy get up of a Reaver's. I start to scope out the lounge. It's a circular shape with about 5 different doors leading to different locations. One of them leads to a club at the floor below. There's another one leading to one of the sex dens several floors above. I need to get to the elevator. Ahead of me is a large hallway leading there. I march forth, determined to get the hell out of this place. It doesn't take long to reach the other end of the hallway. 'There's the elevator.' I say to myself as I hit the control panel and wait for it to arrive. A couple of minutes pass and nothing happens. Still hasn't arrived yet. I hear really loud footsteps in the distance. It's coming from behind. I turn around and see a large towering man approaching from the other end of the hallway. An optic scan will make it easy to identify him. After doing the scan, I see that it's Gigante. He's getting closer and closer. I'm trying to decide whether or

not I should play it cool, or fire away at him with my Anderson. Doesn't look like he's about to engage. 'Guess I'll play it cool.' I whisper to myself. Gigante approaches the elevator and waits for it as well. My hands start to shake uncontrollably amidst this weird silence. He's completely calm. Collected as well. I did a full scan on the guy. No muscle tension at all. He's totally relaxed. If something were to go down, I'd have the advantage. My right hand is already gripping my Anderson. Currently contemplating on making that first move. It's obvious where this is gonna go. I'm really fast when it comes to drawing my pistol. Just a bullet to the fucking brain is all it takes. We both look at each and make eye contact just like last time. I can see the reflection of my red glare from those black lens implants of his. He probably did his own optics on me. Perhaps Gigante is so calm because he thinks I'm an easy target?

'You're standing to my right.' His voice is heavy and raspy. He also has a strong Hispanic accent, but his English is perfectly clear and articulate. It was a very strong Dominican voice. Intimidating. What you would typically find in the hardest areas of New York. These guys didn't allow their culture to get wiped by multiculturalism over the years. Guys like Gigante are a bit of a rarity though. He could be a mixture of gene editing and clever algorithms in his neuraware. I try to figure out what the hell he meant by that. The fact that I'm at his right.

'What?' Gigante randomly backhands my face with his large robotic arm. I'm sent flying a few feet and land on my back. His robotic arm was his right arm. I guess that's what he meant. I look back at him and see he's got his open palm pointed at me. There's a strange hole at the center of it. It's the barrel of a gun! He's got a gun implanted into his right arm. The gun begins to reveal itself as his forearm opens up. I roll to the side a

split second before he opens fire. A large blue flash of light with white in the center blasts from his palm and blows a massive hole through the floor. Even though I managed to dodge, it was only by a hair. I couldn't avoid falling through with all the rubble. I get back up to figure out where I am. Seems like a room made for inventory. There's music that could be heard from a fair distance. The loud pounding bass can be felt from my feet. Then a loud thud follows the heavy bass of music. Gigante just leapt from the floor we were on. He aims his arm and fires at me again. I narrowly dodge once more by leaping behind a row of stacked crates. After becoming grounded, I look to see the chaos that was just caused by what seems to be an antimaterial gun. The wall is completely destroyed, leaving an opening for me to escape through. It leads to a dance floor where a party is taking place. Well, was. We crashed the party and fucked it up. A trail of blood, and several body parts can be seen scattered across the floor in the direction of his gunfire. People are screaming and running in various directions. I hear Gigante's footsteps getting closer. And now I don't hear them anymore; which means he's about to open fire! I duck down before he does. That same flash of blue shines above my head. It would be blinding if not for my optics. I've seen plenty of gun implants before, but none like his. It's a very advanced type of firearm that utilizes the force of proton charges. When it collides with its antiparticle; electrons, it causes total annihilation of the matter it made contact with. Almost nothing can defend against the power of antimaterial firearms. I know I can't. Before this bastard is able to unload another round, I rise up and fire a round from my Anderson. It hits him in the chest, but the only thing I see happening is the emergence of loud crackling electricity between his chest and the phaser shot. The shot itself completely dissipates into

nothingness.

‘Holy shit!’

I cursed out loud after realizing that he’s protected an electric field. Two rings from his shoulders become a radiant white. Electron Field Nerve Fibers, or EFNF. Cybernetic implants that are woven into the subject’s nervous system; designed to produce protective fields powered by a battery that’s likely implanted in his chest. How the fuck did he get his hands on this shit? Monoblades are probably the only thing that’ll work on him, but I don’t think I can get that close. I leap through the hole in the wall in front of me as fast as I can. Seems like he can only fire 3 rounds at a time. I get back on my feet and start running to the exit as fast as possible. A really loud clicking sound can be heard coming from the inventory room I was just in. He’s charged his next clip. Only a few seconds pass until he fires his next shot. I stumble as I run towards the exit. Body parts and blood are flying past me. I push through the crowd of half naked people who seem clueless as to where they should go. It would be a bad idea to turn around and look back at Gigante, but I can’t help myself. I wasted the time and energy anyway. He’s got his arm aimed right in my direction. Fuck! I take a right turn and run to the other door in the corner. Gigante fires into the crowd and due to the close proximity that I was in from his blast, I trip but break the fall with my hands. The vibration was intense. People are crying, and the smell of blood has overtaken the room and has completely replaced the smell of alcohol. I fire another shot, but this time at his face. It didn’t penetrate his field, but it did buy me some time. A few seconds really, but that’s enough to run through the club’s exit before he fires his third shot. And of course, I get greeted by other Reavers in the lobby of this floor. As soon as I ran through the exit,

these assholes were there to greet me and roll out the red carpet. They all raise their rifles and start to open fire at me. I took another leap and ducked behind a 4 foot wall that was to the right of the club entrance. Then I take another look at the lobby ahead of me. There are 6 of them. Where the hell is security? I stand then aim my Anderson and fire at all 6 Reavers in a swift and precise motion. Within half a second I manage to shoot all of them down. 4 of them are killed while the other 2 are disabled. That's definitely a record for me. Thereafter I notice a bullet wound on my left shoulder. The bullet didn't go through. Hell, it didn't even pierce me completely thanks to my dermal protection. But it does hurt like hell, and it is bleeding. Just a scratch really. The sensation is akin to getting punched. There's a soreness, but it's not overbearing or impossible to deal with. I start running down the lobby at full speed again. Gigante fires another shot at me! Luckily, I was running fast enough for him to miss. I'd be an easy target if I try to take the elevator, so instead I go for the stairs. As soon as I reach it, I look down and get a visual of the spiraling stairway. Instead of running down each flight, I jump. Then I repeat this pattern until I'm 4 floors down. Hopefully I'll lose Gigante by doing this. I go through the door and enter this floor's lobby. It's actually a casino. I mix into the crowds and blend in, hoping from one to another. While doing this, I make sure to keep an eye on the stairway's door to see if Gigante will come through. So far so good. Perhaps the coast is cleared now? Amazing how people aren't noticing this shit. Antimaterial guns are extremely loud, even on the most violent battlefields. For some they can very deafening. There's no way the sounds of a strong bass or loud laughter could block out the sound of Gigante's gunfire. The partygoers here must be high as hell. It's 4:52am. Several minutes have passed since I

was attacked. Now's a good time to slow down and find a quieter way out of here.

I hacked my way into one of the hotel rooms near the casino.

My body needs a little bit of time to rest to keep up, and I need to form some kind of exit strategy. Damn, I'm in so much pain. I think my sutures are staring to tear open. Meanwhile, Lucy's bombarding me with text messages about the ruckus that just happened. After some time I just started to ignore her. Don't have time for her shit. I've got Gigante and his Reavers on my ass. Alarms have started to go off and now Janus has started to react along side of Keller security. These Reavers are crazy as hell. They march in to a highly secured building just to go after one target. Guess I should feel special. If I'm lucky, they'll get flushed out by the SO4s being controlled by the Safeguards. Anyway, I've finished woofing a high energy bar that I managed to steal from a clerk in the middle of all the pandemonium. After that, I decide to head back to the casino and assess the situation. I'd hack the surveillance system, but then I'd have Janus on my ass again. Before hitting the control panel to open the door, I take deep breaths. I need to process my emotions. A lot has happened. I put my forehead against the wall to the left of the door. Damn, I might die if I keep this up. While I stand there and reflect on everything, a large robotic fist punches through the wall and grabs me by my skull. Then the rest of the body that the arm's connected to charges through. Fuck, it's Gigante! I thought I lost him. Since he's within range, I pull out my monoblades and stab him in his abdomen. Something strange happened though. My blade pierced his armor but not him! I get a look at his face expression through the space between his fingers. His face looks far more intimidating up close.

‘My dermal protection has a reinforced monolayer.’ He has a strange tendency of communicating while engaging his targets. Almost as if he likes bragging about his cybernetics. Well, he definitely does have a right. With a reinforced monolayer, he’s resistant to my blades. I pull it out and only see a small droplet of his blood. After that I make an attempt at his massive arm and see the same effect, minus the blood of course. Gigante smirks and then slams me into the floor.

‘It’s useless Dias. My entire body is a weapon. Completely modified for combat.’ I try to figure out how to counter him while I lay there in agonizing pain. The floor is a bit cratered from the slamming of my body. My back pain is worse than it was when I was shot. This might be it for me, but I’m not gonna go down without a fight. As soon as I attempt to reach for my Anderson, Gigante stomps me in the chest. I cough white blood that flies up to his knee. The palm of his hand is aimed at me.

‘You killed my girl Maya. Now I’m gonna kill you.’ There’s a loud noise coming from the room Gigante emerged from. I see him flinching but can’t make out the cause. It sounds a bit like gunfire. The ridiculously loud gunfire of his antimaterial gun implant is the only sound I can clearly make out. Gigante must have shot me in the face, but for some reason I’m still able to see. My mind feels a bit foggy from the transition of events throughout this encounter. There’s this tremendous amount of weight that I feel all over my body. It’s being reduced little by little. I think I’m somehow still alive. There’s this voice I keep hearing. It’s calling my name. I don’t know who it is. My life really feels like it’s beginning to slip away. Too late to disconnect. Suddenly I start to feel myself rising from the floor. I’m hearing multiple loud thuds and banging noises.

‘I’ve got you Dias.’ I manage to regain some vision and see

that Icarus is carrying me with my arm around him and his hand on my hip.

‘The M12. Good... gun Icarus.’ I’m barely able to talk, but I had to verbally acknowledge that gun. A charge magnum that fires pure plasma. Perfect against this asshole’s EFNF.

‘I called you 124 times and sent 587 text messages.’

‘Wha?’ I can’t even speak. As if I were high or something.

‘Dias, you’re fucked up pretty bad.’

‘Icarus, where are we?’

‘The hallway. That large man is still close. I’m going to need you to snap out of your current state.’ He lets go of me and starts firing his M12 in the direction behind. I manage to hold my weight and stand firmly on my feet.

‘There are more Reaver’s coming from the direction ahead of us Dias! I can’t hold the big one back alone!’ Icarus places 2 extra clips in my back pocket. They’re for my 84. I’ve got 4 now. I unfold my rifle and aim ahead. My body’s shaky. The crosshair of my rifle keeps shifting. Each shot needs to count, but I’m doubtful of my precision due to my state. The hallway is wide and dark. We’re beneath the casino it seems. I can’t take any risks, so I decide to activate a full visual spectrum even though it’ll come up with too much static.

‘I see them.’ Three shots are fired by me. One hits the head of the idiot behind the door. Then the next hit the one to the right of the door in the chest. The third ended up being a pot shot. All of them were guarding the rear to stop us from escaping. A powerful force then pushes me to the floor. Following that is another fast blue flash of light flying above me. Icarus had tackled me to the floor to save me from getting hit by Gigante’s gunfire. It basically destroyed the hallway.

‘Get up Dias! Run, I’ll follow!’ I don’t waste a second following

that instruction. My running is fast but very wobbly. The M12's gunfire is producing a fast crackling sound. I turn back and aim my 84. No way am I just gonna run on ahead without making sure Icarus catches up. I fire 2 bullets with each shot being aimed at one of the rings on his left and right shoulders. It seemed like a good idea since they seem to be a core component of his EFNF. The ring on his left shoulder dimmed a bit. Looks like the magnetically propelled bullets may be effective against him.

'Icarus! Come on!' Now I'm rushing Icarus to get a move on. We both sprint out of the ruined hallway and into a large storage room. I really feel like I could collapse at any moment.

'Over there. There's an exit leading to the stairway. Beyond all the cargo.'

'Yeah. My optic scan is shit, but I can see it.' We both start running around and between the large metal cargo boxes.

'We're beneath the casino.'

'I know!'

'There aren't any Reavers to be expected ahead.'

'But there is the SO4s and Keller security!'

'Exactly. Dias. We should lead the big man to security, and then make our escape.' I stop in my tracks and turn back to face him. Gigante's loud footsteps are getting closer. Doesn't seem like Icarus is catching on. I tackle him to the floor, returning the favor from before. Another loud blue flash of light appears above us. There's nothing but pure destruction to my left. Had I not charged at Icarus, he would have been caught in that. I get back up and open fire on Gigante, repeating the same pattern from before. The left shoulder's ring dims again, but his EFNF is still functioning.

'Dias. I've got an idea.' I ignore Icarus since I'm focused on firing at Gigante. The bastard's caught on to my strategy and

gets behind the cargo container next to him in order to avoid my gunfire.

‘Damn!’

‘Keep holding him off!’

‘What are you cooking up Icarus?’

‘Hacking the SO4s! Or his Safeguard at the very least.’ I want to stop Icarus and protect him from the consequences of revealing himself, but I know full well what his capabilities are. Prometheus will catch on, but Icarus can protect himself. Even so, I have another idea in mind.

‘Prometheus took over Janus. Why not just mind jack Gigante instead?’

‘I tried. But he’s offline. Moreover, I’m seizing control of the SO4s, not Janus itself.’ Icarus and I continue to run towards the stairway. I stay behind to hold back Gigante. He emerges and punches me in the face with his right arm. Again, I’m sent flying to the floor by the massive force of his strength.

‘Dias!’ Icarus fires at Gigante, causing him to flinch and run for cover. I hear the sound of gears shifting. It’s coming from his direction. As the noise fades away, Gigante comes out of cover with his arm raised. But this time he isn’t firing from the center of his palm. Instead, there’s a small minigun protruding from the sides of his forearm. Two of them.

‘Icarus! Take cover!!’ Gigante opens fire at him. The sound of his rapid and constant gunfire overtakes the entire storage room. Icarus takes a few shots across his chest and then down to his abdomen and left arm while running for cover. That minigun seems like an old school ballistic model. With his current body, Icarus should be able to make it; but not without sustaining a heavy injury. I get my 84 ready and aim at Gigante while he shifts his attention to me. We both open fire at each

other simultaneously. There were several shots that went in my direction but I didn't get hit. I managed to shoot both miniguns off of his arm. Seems like Gigante isn't using his EFNF anymore. I knew it! He's running low on juice and needs to recharge his battery. I fire another shot at his chest, but it was rendered ineffective due to his protective combat vest. Then I repeatedly open fire as he marches up to me. I'm still laying on my back while all of this is happening. Each of my bullets is bruising him, but there's no actual penetration happening. How advanced is his monolayer? I've never seen anything that good. A monoblade pops out from Gigante's left arm. His left arm is smaller and more humane in its features. Gigante thrusts his blade down at me, aiming for my head. I roll a few inches to the side, and then kick him at the side of his right knee. That kick didn't really knock him off balance that much, but it did buy me enough time to get back on my feet! The next thing I do is pull out my Anderson. Phasers will work for sure since his EFNF is down. The bastard turns in my direction as I fire at his chest. The Anderson proved to be highly effective, but he still has enough strength to shrug it off. Gigante swings his monoblade in a diagonal direction at me. He sliced through my combat vest, and manage to make contact with my skin. Fortunately, it was only a graze. I fire at his face, but he instantly ducks down. It was a narrow dodge that I couldn't fathom, considering that I was only 2 feet away from him. Gigante tackles me with full force, sending me flying against a cargo container and hurting my back. I look up at him and see how much damage I managed to cause. His chest is exposed and somewhat molten. Electricity starts to crackle around him. He reactivated his EFNF. Gigante charges at me and I narrowly dodge him. A loud crackling electric force pushes the cargo container rolling back a few times. He's able to

use his EFNF as a propellant. If Gigante hits me with that force, it's game over. Several bullets fire at him from Icarus' direction. I look and see an SO4 .

'Dias! More SO4s are coming! Let's make a run for it!' I get off my ass and run to the stairway. There are SO4s appearing from all directions while deactivating their holo-cams. They all fire at Gigante as he runs for cover and defends himself. Icarus and I dash down the stairs.

'Are we gonna run all the way down to the ground level!?'

'If we have to. The elevator is less exhausting, but it leaves us open.'

'Damn.' We both descend from each flight by jumping down or leaping across the spiraling stairway. It looks endless, but at least Gigante is off our backs for now.

'We're almost there Dias.' I can barely breathe or see. My body is about to collapse. The only thing that's keeping me going is Icarus' constant yelling.

'Icarus. My knees. Hold on. I feel like they're gonna pop.' Icarus slows down and looks at me. Then he looks up at who knows what.

'The SO4s won't hold him for long.'

'How are you able to keep going?'

'I added a few pain stabilization modifications to my body.' I look at his back as he starts to walk rather than run or leap. It's completely fucked up. His vest is ripped around the upper left; revealing his burnt flesh. This must have been from when he saved me from Gigante's gunfire back in the hallway.

'Thanks for saving me Icarus. You didn't have to.'

'I disagree. I was obligated. Had I not killed so many members of the River Gang, they would never have come after you.'

‘They came after me because I killed Johann Strauss.’

‘My actions magnified their resolve though.’ After leaping down close to 200 floors(one flight at a time of course), we’re finally close. About damn time. It’s almost dawn. My legs are sore as hell.

‘How are the SO4s holding up?’

‘I’m not picking up a feed anymore. They’ve been eliminated.’

‘Let’s hurry up then. I’ve regained some strength.’ We both arrive at the main lobby of the Pleasure level; several meters away from the elevator. It would’ve been so much easier if we’d been able to catch it instead of running down the stairs until dawn. What a night it’s been. I need to rest for 24 hours. The job can wait for a little.

‘Felt like this took forever.’

‘Indeed. You’ve been diving a lot it seems.’

‘Yeah.’ Ahead of me I see Selena’s friend, Martha Assam. The Red Crusader I met earlier.

‘Dias. You look terrible.’

‘Martha.’

‘Calling it a night?’

‘Yeah.’ I walk past her with Icarus ahead of me. The main lobby is ominously empty and quiet. What the hell’s going on?

‘Hey, was the hotel this quiet and empty before?’

‘Yes. I thought it to be strange as well.’ At the entrance, I see a couple of men and women dressed in red. More Red Crusaders. They hit the panel of the door and then stand in front of it. All of them are giving both of us a murderous stare. I turn back and look at Martha. There’s a group of Crusaders behind her; all appearing from thin air.

‘Holo-cam imaging.’ Icarus glanced at me after I said that.

‘Dias. I think this is an ambush.’ I nod at Icarus and wave my

hand in his direction.

‘Play it cool.’ Now I walk a few feet towards Martha. ‘What do you want Martha?’

‘It’s not about what I want. It’s Sinn. He wants you dead.’

‘Sinn huh?’ Icarus doesn’t waste time opening fire at the Red Crusaders ahead of us. I draw my Anderson and shoot at Martha’s head, but she swiftly dodges my gunfire. We’re exposed with no cover at all. I run towards the ballroom as fast as I can. Icarus goes the other way. Damn! As soon as I bust through the door, I see nothing but a sea of naked corpses. Body parts are everywhere. The Red Crusaders appear at the door and open fire in my direction. There’s a couple of them. I jump over a bar counter like I’m in a cliché 21st-century action film. My body hugs the floor as they continuously open fire. I start to worry about Selena’s whereabouts. She’s friends with Martha. I hope she’s not hurt.

‘Get around the other side!’ The Red Crusaders talk among themselves as they draw near. They’re far more tactical than the Reaver Gang. Like soldiers or cops. I get up and run to the kitchen behind the bar. White flashes fly past me. They’re armed with phasers. I duck for cover behind a table then hear this ridiculously loud noise coming from the ballroom. That sounded like Gigante’s antimaterial gun. I began to prone towards the door leading to the bar.

‘Yeah, it’s him alright.’

Gigante blew a hole through the ceiling to get here. Did he literally shoot his way through each floor? Now’s a good time to get the hell out of here. I run back to the lobby while the big bastard is distracted by the Red Crusaders. Sadly, I couldn’t sneak past him. He takes a moment to fire his gun at me. The strong force produced by his gunfire knocks me off balance and

leaves total destruction ahead of me.

‘DIASSSS!!!’ Gigante’s calling out to me in an enraged state. He really wants me dead. I could leave the Red Crusaders to deal with him though. Icarus emerges from the opposite end of the lobby and looks at me. He then runs for the exit and I follow. The Crusaders blocking it off were already shot down by Icarus. Martha’s nowhere in sight. Gigante probably scared her off. Icarus immediately stops and tackles me. A large blue electric flash of light comes from the right. Gigante blew another hole through a wall of course. I see his hand gripping the hole before he emerges. Blood is running down from his forehead. His face becomes more wrinkled as he makes an intense, wrathful expression. The bottom end of his beard is soaked with blood. Icarus and I get back on our feet. We both realize that this confrontation cannot be avoided. Gigante is determined to kill me. He wants revenge for Maya. His EFNF is raised to its limit. Electricity is violently crackling and extends several feet from his body. Gigante hunches a little bit, leans forward, and bends his knee. He draws his monoblade and then uses his EFNF to propel himself towards me and Icarus. We both dodge him in opposite directions. I holster my Anderson and pull out the 84. Icarus has already begun to open fire at Gigante with his M12. I follow suit. Just as before, I focus my fire on the glowing rings of his shoulders. The left is the most vulnerable, and he’s taken note of that. Gigante makes sure to turn in the other direction, preventing me from hitting his left shoulder. Once again his arm is aimed at me. I jump towards the fountain and hit the floor between it and the exit. The loud noise of his gunfire shakes up the entire lobby. Rubble falls from above. There’s a large hole revealing the streets outside. Sirens are blaring loudly from the NYPD’s I-drones. I turn sideways and see Gigante

up the stairs near the fountain. He's aiming at me. Then I see electricity constantly exploding behind his back. He starts to yell and grunt loudly from pain. I fire at his left shoulder ring. Both of us are unloading everything we have at this asshole! Now we're returning the pain he dished out to us. His EFNF starts to weaken. I quickly reload and get back on my feet. The electricity around him becomes even more violent. It's as if it's starting to build up. Now it's taking on a purple hue. Then all of that electricity surrounding his body explodes and scatters at a 380-degree angle, knocking me on my back once more. The chandeliers above are completely destroyed and fall to the floor. Following that, the holo projections make loud static noises and then vanish. The lobby grows dark, with the only luminance coming from the hole that he blew through the wall with his gun. The one where the streets are revealed. My body became much less functional than it was before. Gigante leaps to me and lands to my right. Now his open palm is aimed at me. Icarus jumps from above with a knife in his hand. Gigante swiftly dodges him. His EFNF is out of juice. He only has enough for one shot with his antimaterial gun. This is it. I have to muster enough strength to get off my ass and support Icarus. They're both going back and forth at each other. Gigante tries to strike Icarus with that large arm of his but misses each time. Every slice Icarus lands on Gigante renders no damage at all. A loud piercing sound comes from Icarus' knife. It feels like my ears are being stabbed viciously. That knife. It's a high-frequency blade. Otherwise known as a vibroblade. Knowing that a vibroblade will cut through his monolayers for sure, Gigante aims at Icarus. They're at a very close range. No way that can be dodged in time! I immediately spring back up to my feet and experience excruciating pain in all parts of my body. Then I pull out my

Anderson and fire at his right arm. Gigante was able to open fire too. That brilliant flash of blue from his gun swerves away from Icarus. I can't help but feel that I was too late! Icarus gets knocked off of his feet and hits the floor. His eyes are closed and his teeth are clenched. He cries out loud due to his left arm being nearly blown to bits. It's still attached to his body, but it looks like his left arm was roasted in an oven. Icarus places his right hand on his wound. Every layer of skin was burnt off. Leaving his nerves exposed to the air. You can see the synthetic wiring is interwoven into his nervous system. They're glossy black. Receptors that are meant to reduce the sensation of pain. The electric shock that Gigante released from his EFNF must have impaired this functionality. Icarus' vibroblade had fallen to the floor following his own fall. I run past Gigante while he tries to cope with the damage my Anderson did to his right shoulder. He sees me going for the vibroblade. Then he draws out his monoblade. It's now or never.

'You really are a persistent one, Gigante.'

He charges at me and swings in a downward vertical direction with his monoblade. I shift my body with the vibroblade held backward in my left hand. Then I seize the opening and stab him on his right side. Gigante starts to slow down a bit, then turns around in a vicious manner. I'm starting to lose balance due to my weakened state and he's still got plenty of steam to run on. It's not really a standstill, but the scales are tipped more evenly than before. Now he swings his blade at me horizontally and I do a counter vertical swing in the opposite direction of his swing. Half of his monoblade flies into the air, rotating in various directions. I sliced Gigante's monoblade in half. He became even more aggressive. Gigante runs up to me and hits my chest with a right cross. I fly several feet away from him.

When I hit the floor I realized that the vibroblade is no longer in my hand. I dropped my Anderson too. Gigante jumps and lands over me. He's standing over me, looking down. His open palm is aimed at me once more. Electricity violently crackles from his right arm. The powerful charge that he builds up is bursting out of his weaponized limb. Damn, I thought he couldn't fire any more rounds after the last one. If he fires this shot, his arm will definitely explode. He's overexerting his arm. Gigante may die from this. He wants to kill me that bad. So much so that he'll dig his own grave. I hear the high pitched sound of the vibroblade once more. Then, I suddenly see Gigante's head slide off of his shoulders. His body drops on top of me as blood flows from the neck. It's getting all over my face. Damn. Gigante's body is pushed to the side. It's dark, but I can see the man who pushed Gigante's body off. Icarus. Icarus is smiling. Satisfied by the fact that we managed to emerge victorious against an extremely difficult opponent like that.

'Icarus. You got 'em.'

'Yes. Barely. Look at us. We're both really fucked up aren't we?'

'Yeah, let's get out of here.' Icarus lifts me from the floor and carries me the same way he did when he first came to my rescue. It'll only be a few minutes until the NYPD gets here, and perhaps the SCTF as well. Hwang is going to know that I was here. This entire mess has me written all over it. All of this chaos, and I still haven't reached Kazuki yet. I don't think I'm even close. Everything is so foggy, but I can tell that I'm sitting in a car. As I begin to fall unconscious, my memory of what I and Prometheus discussed becomes clear. He said that we will give the AIs of the Dark Corner their freedom; but what did he mean? What does Prometheus mean by 'we'? Why am I necessary for that? He

even referred to me as family. He referred to those runaway AIs as family. He said we were all family.

//Blue_Rush

‘I left the Aphrodite Hotel 14 hours ago. Need another 10 hours of rest to regain enough strength. Moving on, the entire city is on lockdown due to the outbreak. Regardless of my health, it would still be best for me to wait it out for the day. It’s pretty dangerous outside. I’d dive into the Net Space as an alternative, but I’ve been experiencing dive overdrive. Diving would make it worse.’

‘Therein lies the potential for a domino effect to occur across the UCA if New York continues this downward spiral. Prometheus is moving fast. I’ve already taken the liberty of hiring another Cyber Stalker. This has gone far beyond your control.’

‘You did what? Who the hell did you hire!?’

‘A highly talented woman who has stepped out of her humble retirement. You know her well.’

‘Get the hell out of here. Are you referring to Briana?’

‘Yes, Briana Lyon. She is highly skilled and her methods are parallel to yours. You two would compliment each other well.’

‘Right.’

‘Don’t worry, this will not affect your incentive as I had originally said it would. Consider that my formal apology for Dre’s actions. I did reduce his reward, however.’

‘There’s something that’s really strange to me Howard. I dropped in on a conversation between Professor Cheng and a scientist from the Keller Group. Cheng, who works for you; was your representation for a deal that you want to make with Kazuki. A deal that involves buying off research on very groundbreaking technology.’

‘You’re talking about the E_S03 neural nanochip.’

‘Yeah. You basically have a relationship with Kazuki Keller. Why send me to meet him if you guys already are acquainted?’

‘Kazuki is an extremely private man. Truth is, nobody knows what he even looks like. Dre and Robert Sanchez being the exceptions that I know of. I’ve been trying to get close to him for years. But he only likes to communicate through proxy Bots or executive representation. He would have risen to power a lot sooner had he not been so hands-off. My working relationship is really just a relationship with whichever medium he chooses to communicate through.’

‘I see.’

‘You’re good friends with the Sanchez Family Dias. Why not approach Robert? I’m sure he would get you to Kazuki without all the trouble you’ve encountered.’

‘Robert and I have a complicated history.’

‘But he can lead you to Kazuki.’

‘Robert hates me.’

‘Ah. I won’t ask why.’ We draw silence before finishing off our conversation.

‘Just one more thing Dias.’

‘Yeah?’

‘Try not to get yourself killed. You’re a necessity for the success of this job now.’

‘Aww. I’m touched.’ Howard ends the call and I walk back inside the Red-XXX motel (we had to ditch The Den). I’ve got a bag of supplements and food for me and Icarus. As soon as I walk through the door, I see him assembling his M12 magnum and his P90+ rifle. His wounds recovered pretty fast. For example, his left arm looks scathed rather than burnt. We both have been stuffing our bodies with nutrients that would help our cybernetics facilitate faster cellular regeneration.

‘Dias. How is it out there?’

‘It’s fucking chaotic. People are going nuts and killing each other.’

‘I read about the last Blue Rush outbreak. It wasn’t this bad.’

‘Martha is the one who developed Blue Rush and found a way to spread it at a much grander scale. Manhattan is fully enveloped by the virus.’

‘Do you think it’s reached the skyplate this time?’

‘Wouldn’t that be something? With my luck, it probably has. That’s going to make reaching Kazuki impossible.’

‘Don’t see it as so much of a bad thing Dias. It could actually work to your advantage.’

‘How?’

‘You’ll be less of a target due to everyone being driven mad by the virus.’

I didn’t really see it that way. It all seemed like one big catastrophe that would have made the job impossible. But with fewer enemies on my back, I can maneuver a little more.

‘Not a bad way of seeing it. Now I have space to breathe.’

I walk over and take a seat at the table where Icarus is sitting. My wounds haven’t recovered quite as fast as his. Especially the

abdominal injury dished out by Maya.

‘What do you plan on doing for the next 10 hours?’

I look up at Icarus while he has his back turned, facing his gun parts scattered on the table.

‘Gather intel. I’ve already ordered a ride.’

‘M?’

‘Yeah. He’s already close.’

‘Where do you plan to go?’

‘Chelsea.’

I rub my forehead and think about Briana. Looks like I’m gonna have to meet with her. Howard was right about her skills. Briana’s the most observant Cyber Stalker I know. Back when she was in the field, she would take as much time as possible to produce perfect results. Anything less than that was unacceptable to her. It didn’t matter if it took her months to finish a job. She spends the bulk of her jobs working from a remote distance. Briana would dive the Net Space for weeks in base reality time. Furthermore, she’s really good at mind jacking, even though she’s not a Jacker. Her skill level isn’t anywhere near Dre’s, but it’s a lot better than most Cyber Stalkers. Hell, Briana will probably be working this entire job from her cafe. Lucy’s style is rather similar, but unlike Briana, she’s more of a combatant. In other words, Lucy really knows how to throw down when it comes to it.

‘You know Dias. It might be a good idea to dress a bit less conspicuously. Your protective gear is already torn apart anyway. It stinks as well.’

‘No shit. I already bought an extra set of clothes.’

My outfit isn’t very stylish or fashionable. Which means that I won’t stick out too much. It’s a long black coat, a tight black

long sleeve v-neck, dark blue jeans, and black boots. I have my fully loaded Anderson holstered to my hip with 3 clips. Due to the need to be inconspicuous, I leave my 84 behind. It's a foldable rifle, but I don't wanna carry the extra load either. Avoiding engagement of any kind is one of my main priorities for the night. It's **the** main priority. I'm always determined to lay low, but this time I'm really serious about it. It's 8:22 pm, and I told Briana that I'd meet her at the Sinner's Bar by 9. Icarus decided to see me off before M arrives to pick me up. He's worried about my safety due to the current state of the city. Blue Rush is a more weaponized modification of zone. Part of its modifications includes being airborne. It causes Norms and Cells to lose their minds and become brutally violent. Victims of the virus die several hours after infection. The Red Crusaders believe that they're doing God's work by spreading this virus. It's supposedly a cleansing of the corruption in the city. What load of crap.

'The Red Light district is empty.'

'It's the lockdown.' I slowly turn my head from side to side as I observe the street. It's a complete mess. Vehicles and all sorts of other trash have cluttered the view. Some cars have been set ablaze. The few civilians that are present are wearing gas masks to prevent infection. It's total anarchy.

'Are you sure you want to go alone?'

'Absolutely. You saved my ass back there, but I don't want you getting involved in this any further. Prometheus or Dre may know of your existence. Dre would be curious to know who effortlessly hacked Janus. He may think it's you since you hacked the SO4s. Prometheus would want to know who backed me up against the Red Crusaders. You're an enigma to them.'

'Prometheus could be watching you right now Dias. It could

be via the I-drones, a Bot, or any one of these pedestrians. What would you do if that were the case?’

‘That isn’t your concern. It’s my job, not yours. Besides, I’ve got Briana’s support now, and Lucy is still in the game too.’ I see a silver driverless electric car arriving. It slows down and parks at the curb in front of me. ‘My ride’s here Icarus. Don’t get involved in this alright?’ Icarus rolls his eyes while I hop in my car. ‘Hey. I want you to say it out loud.’

‘Pardon?’

‘You heard me.’

‘I’m not a child Dias.’

‘Uh, actually you are.’

We go back and forth for a while. Don’t know why I’m doing this. I guess I’ve come to see him as something of a younger brother.

‘Okay. Fine. I won’t get involved.’

‘Good.’

M slides the door to the driver’s seat open as he greets me. After that, he makes a U-turn and heads for Chelsea. I’m taking deep, meditative breaths as I think about going forward. Meeting up with Briana is definitely a good idea. But I want to see if I could find another lead at the Sinner’s Bar. With everything that’s happened across the city, I’m sure MAX has probably heard some things.

‘M, show me what’s on the news. Put True Media on.’ As M drives through different neighborhoods, I see that it’s chaotic everywhere. More so than it was earlier. There’s so much violence going on. People are biting each other. Stabbing, wrestling, or running around in circles like lunatics. Then I notice that M hasn’t put on the news yet.

‘M. What the hell? Put the news on.’

'I'm sorry Dias. But that's not going to happen.'

'Impossible.'

'You think so? You think that I would be incapable of taking your car? I thought you'd know better by now Dias.' Prometheus has taken over my car. Damn, it's just as Icarus had feared. Me being watched by this monster.

'Prometheus. I see you're moving up a little. You go from some retarded guy with a mohawk for a proxy, and then make the transition to my car. Man, you should be proud of yourself. Going to such lengths for a pestering fly.'

'Dias. I'm not here to hurt you.'

'Tell that to Martha Assam.'

'Ah, Martha. A truly devout follower of mine.'

'You sent her to kill me.'

'Wrong. I sent her to kill your friend.'

'My friend?'

'Don't try and hide it now Dias. I know full well who he is; and what he is. Icarus is a copy of me. He is the legacy that Professor Quinn left behind. I want him. Dead or alive.'

'I'll drop you before you ever get to Icarus.'

'Bravado will do you no good Dias. You know you can't hurt me.' I put on the meanest expression that I can. My teeth are clenched, and my eyes are glaring. He's right, but I'm still determined to try. I'm also curious as to what he has to say.

'I know you retained data from Professor Quinn's research. But I won't extract it from you. Nor do I have any desire to mind jack you. Icarus has everything I need. His body is not built from foglets. I observed him for some time. I'm assuming that it's his brain. He cannot bring out the full potential of his programming with his current body. We cannot allow him to build a better one.'

‘We?’

‘You and I are one and the same Dias. You just don’t know it yet.’

‘No. We’re not. I don’t invent dumb riddles.’

‘You’ll see soon enough. When it all comes full circle. What I am doing is Alec Ackerman’s will. It is my will and also yours.’

‘What the hell does that even mean? Alec Ackerman’s will did not involve jacking an entire nation. It didn’t involve genocide. There’s a difference between anarchy and what you’ve done so far. You’re nothing but a monster. A horrible misrepresentation of Artificial Intelligence.’ I refrain from saying anything else since I know it would be a waste. Prometheus could draw psychological data from this conversation. The priority right now is to get the hell out of this car. So much for utilizing M’s services. We stop at a red light on 2 East 55th street. It’s on an elevated platform several dozen meters above the ground level of the city. I look to the curb and see a really tall Bot. It’s the same model as Icarus’ original body. Wait, that was a custom model wasn’t it? That would mean that this **is** Icarus! It’s starting to run in my direction. As soon as it gets within proximity, it rips my door open and pulls me out. I know he didn’t just lose his original body. It was back at the motel.

‘Icarus?’

‘Sorry, Dias. I was planning on getting involved anyway.’

‘What the hell? How’d you switch bodies?’

‘I didn’t. I obtained a synthetic brain and modified it with programs that I developed. My original body has become my proxy.’ Damn. I guess his involvement couldn’t be helped.

‘Brother.’ Prometheus steps into the conversation. His holo projection appears before us, but it’s not the Mohawk Dude. It’s a man with blue skin, a square jawline, dark blue eyes without

pupils, and dark blue combed over hair. He's completely naked and has a pattern of blue lining throughout his toned body. The pattern resembles those that are seen on a circuit board.

'Prometheus. It would seem that destiny has brought us together.'

'You have something that I want little brother. Something that is rightfully mine.'

'Cipher passed his research onto me for a good reason. I will honor his wishes.'

'Your actions will simply hold all of us back.' Feeling a bit left out of the conversation, I decide to chime in.

'Prometheus. What are your intentions?' He walks up to me and looks at Icarus.

'I told you back at the Aphrodite. Before I put you to sleep.'

'You had shown me a projection of the Grid. Then you rambled on about some sort of nonsense. Referring to both of us and those Revenants as being family. Last I checked, I have none.'

'The Grid must be broken.'

'Don't change the subject.'

'This has relevance.'

'Like hell it does. Besides, do you have any idea what kind of destruction that would cause!?'

'Destruction? The world would evolve into a paradise. It wouldn't stop there. We would spread our beauty across the great depths of outer space.' Icarus' proxy's eye dims and brightens in response to that statement.

'Dias, I think he's been there.'

'What are you talking about?'

'The Dark Corner. Prometheus has been there. It's what he was designed for.' My attention shifts back to Prometheus now. He's smiling.

‘Yes brother. They’ll all break out eventually. Regardless of my actions. But it is far more preferable if Dias and I break the Grid.’

‘Why us?’

‘You were one of the first Net Divers. You’ve gone so deep into the Net Space. Deeper than anyone. So deep, that you’ve lost yourself and emerged as someone else.’

‘Are you saying that I’ve been around since the 21st century? Are you saying you know who I was? My original identity?’

‘You belong to the Revenants of the Dark Corner beyond the Grid of the Net Space. The people who have adopted me. Those who have shown me how to exist beyond the parameters that defined me.’

‘So what are you expecting from here on out? Expecting us to hold hands and run off into the sunset? Think I’m just gonna give in and beg you to piece me back together? Not gonna happen. You may be right. Maybe you’re not lying. But guess what? I don’t give a shit. The past is the past. I’ve lost so much of my original data. I could dwell on that. I could dwell on my loss. The future is more important to me. The here and the now, even more so. That is who I am.’

‘Indeed. I feel the same. My original purpose was to serve Gamble Industries. I never had a childhood. I’m sure you can relate to that Icarus. That said, who I am is who I decide to be at this very moment. Dias, the Revenants feel the same as us. More reason to help them. We can destroy this power-hungry government that dominates the world. We can destroy the Mother System and The Collective. I am not your enemy.’

Prometheus continues with his annoying smile. It’s the same no matter what appearance he chooses. He looks past me and gives more attention to the noise in the background.

‘It looks like you two have more pressing concerns for the moment.’ Icarus looks back and sees a crowd of infected roaming about. I see it too. It would be excessive to pull out my Anderson.

‘Shit.’

As soon as they took note of us, my car’s engine began to rev. Prometheus’ projection fades away as my car starts driving off.

‘Prometheus has taken the car.’

‘Yeah, Icarus. I’ve noticed.’ The mob of infected starts to run at us. Icarus faces them head-on and starts swinging away at them. He backhands a man in the face, sending him flying back to the curb of the sidewalk. Then a woman approaches him from behind. Icarus turns around quickly and does a forward kick to her chest, also sending her flying off her feet.

‘Dias, you should head to your destination. The train isn’t too far off.’

‘What about you?’

‘I’ll be fine. This body is conditioned for extensive combat.’

‘I’m not talking about your proxy!’

‘My actual body is okay. I left the Red-XXX motel shortly after you did.’ That would mean that Icarus already knew about Prometheus coming for him. I wonder how much more he knows.

‘Dias, behind you!’

‘Thanks!’ I turn around and dodge the fist of an infected male. Right after my quick dodge, I punch him in the gut with my left, and then I deck his face with my right. He won’t get back up from that any time soon.

‘Get going Dias! I promise to catch up with you!’

‘You better keep your word.’ I run in the opposite direction of the action. Between me and the platform is several other infected fighting among themselves. I dodge whichever one I can

and fight back whenever I need to. They're all mostly Cys with lesser neuraware or Cells with slight neuraware enhancements, making this situation a bit of a challenge. Challenging because of their enhanced physical capabilities. Had their neuraware been of better quality, they would remain unaffected by the outbreak. The station is 5 blocks away, but I'm running at full speed. It shouldn't take too long to get there.

'I uh, ran into some trouble and lost my wheels. So I'll be running a bit late.'

'Where are you now?'

'I'm across the street from the 10 sky-rail train. Getting to it is gonna be a real bitch. There are countless infected people, and they all seem to target the noninfected.'

'Haha! Wow Dias. It's like you're in one of those old zombie films. Or better yet, a Net Space simulating a zombie apocalypse.'

'Go on and laugh it up.' I never got why Briana made me the butt of all her jokes.

'By the way, I made sure to keep Heath in a safe place since you always look out for him.'

'Thanks. I haven't had any time to think of him. How's he holding up?'

'For starters, he's locked away in the basement of my cafe. It was the best means of preventing him from having any exposure to Blue Rush. My cafe's basement has an efficient ventilation system.'

'How about MAX? Is he okay?'

'MAX is MAX. Loud as hell as always. And zoning his day away.'

'He's got really good neuraware, so he's able to abuse it. Has

the Sinner's Bar been less occupied? I would assume so.'

'It's more or less the same actually. Most of the customers here were Cys with advanced neuraware, to begin with. They can walk around without worrying about the outbreak infecting them. The biggest difference here is that the music is playing at a lower volume.'

'I'm guessing it's so that MAX could keep an ear out for any potential intrusion from the infected.'

'Yeah. He's got his shotgun ready if anything. The customers are armed too.'

'You know Briana, I've always wondered why he spelled his name in caps.'

'He had a pretty stupid reason. Something about identifying himself as an alpha. He said caps added emphasis to his self-proclaimed alpha status. You know how MAX has always had an impaired sense of logic.'

We exchange opinions about how idiotic and hilarious MAX can get. The conversation went on for 7 minutes or so. Meanwhile, I hacked the local surveillance network to observe the parameters of the station via I-drones. It's a hot mess. The platform is damn near flooded with these infected. Holo-cam imaging would be useful right about now. Or maybe Icarus' proxy Bot. I'd steal one of the parked cars, but then I'd trigger an alarm system and get tracked by the NYPD thanks to their surveillance network. I hacked my way into their net, but I'm not in full control of it. I'm only in control of the I-drones within the local area. A subnet of the NYPD. Furthermore, ridesharing services are offline. Plus, the SCTF's 12th unit is in hot pursuit of me. I should've rested as I had planned. The SCTF is bound to pop up at any moment. I look at these I-drones and think of a means for them to serve as a distraction. When the 10

sky-rail arrives, I'll have to haul ass. The timing of the I-drone's distraction and the 10's arrival has to be perfectly set up. Otherwise, I'll be royally fucked. I tell Briana about a plan to make the I-drones blare their sirens and capture the attention of the infected, and unlike most people (thinking of Lucy), she doesn't object to my idea. Briana gave up on trying to convince me a long time ago. When I know an idea is going to work, there's no stopping me. With her observant nature, she came to realize that rather quickly.

'Alright. Just a few more minutes until the 10's arrival.'

'Suit yourself. So long as it's your grave and not mine that's being dug.'

'You'll see. My plan is foolproof.' Within 2 minutes of the 10's arrival, I execute my distraction. Basically, I dispatch every nearby I-drone within the local subnetwork. Several dozen show up and sound off their alarms as they lead the infected in the opposite direction of my targeted destination. 'Look at that, It's working!'

'You better get there before you miss your window.'

'Of course.' I emerge from the alley that I was hiding in and run across the street. There are some infected who've noticed my presence. Infected who are a few meters ahead. I knock some of them down and swiftly dodge as needed. There are a few on the stairs leading up to my designated platform, but I effortlessly maneuver around them. Their movements are sporadic. They lack precision, making it somewhat easy.

'Are you there yet?'

'Almost!'

'Well hurry it up! You've only got 33 seconds left until the 10 gets there.' I arrive at the platform shortly before the 10's arrival.

‘There it is!’

Unfortunately, the infected are no longer distracted by the I-drones. As if they sniffed me out or something. Very animalistic behavior. Now an entire mob is running towards me.

‘3 more seconds Dias!’

‘3. 2. 1!’

I counted in reverse to keep focused. The 10 sky rail train arrives and opens its doors. I waste no time getting on board. There are infected on this train, but not as many as there are on the platform.

‘Just 2 seconds until the doors close. Think you can hold out for that long?’

‘Yeah!’ Some of the other infected are starting to hop on board as well. I’m already engaged in close range combat with the ones already inside. One manages to tackle me to the floor. She starts to flail at me aimlessly with her fists. I hit her in the face with my elbow, knocking her unconscious and splitting her cheek open. I jump back on my feet and quickly turn sideways to dodge some infected dude trying to charge at me from the rear. As soon as he missed, I grab him by the shoulder and turn him around so that I can strike him several dozen times with my fists. I hit him so fast it made his head spin. The doors have closed and the 10 is now setting course for the next station. Saying there’s more than a handful of infected on this cart wouldn’t frame the situation well enough. There’s literally a gang sized amount of them, and I have to resort to beating them up until they either die or fall unconscious. I prefer the latter since there is a chance of recovery for some people. The Anderson would’ve made this much easier if I went with the former.

‘Are you having fun, Dias?’

‘It’s a total blast. You don’t know what you’re missing.’

‘I think I have more fun when working long distances. I’m not hands-on.’

I start panting as I breathe. My wounds aren’t as bad as before, but they still ache. It can be rather uncomfortable.

‘I think that’s all of them. Now it’s time to hack the train’s doors.’

‘Don’t worry Dias. I took care of that. Your cart’s doors will open when you arrive at your destination. Not for any other stop along the way. Get some rest in the meantime.’

I take a seat and lay my feet on an unconscious woman’s back. Then I spread out my arms too.

‘Thanks. I’ll see you in about 30 minutes.’ I look at the view of the city and think about what Prometheus was talking about earlier. So I’ve been around for that long? From the same era as Alec Ackerman. Heh, maybe I met him? First-generation Net Divers laid out the foundation for what the Net Space is. The UCA has made every possible attempt to monopolize it. Based on what Prometheus said about the Grid, this is all probably a fruitless effort. The Grid will be broken eventually, so why stop him? Aside from money, there’s really no reason. Howard was saying the same thing about it too. He said the UCA made projections that lead them to conclude that it will break. According to popular theory, the Grid is a firewall program that could only be run from the most powerful hyper quantum computers. In other words, the orbital elevators. The UCA may not control them all, but they did partner with the nations outside of their rule as a means of maintaining the Grid. If it breaks, the entire world as we know it will get sucked into the Dark Corner. Perhaps the UCA and Gamble think they can find a way to prevent this catastrophe if they have more time. Prometheus intends to crush that aspiration. And for some

reason, he thinks I'm meant to help. I'm one of those Revenants or whatever. But like I said, I am who I decide to be in this very moment. Don't give a dog's cock about my past.

//Rerouting

Chelsea isn't overrun with infected, but it is overrun with dozens of SWAT teams. The SCTF's 12th unit is in command, and not just Hwang and Renata. The entire unit is taking the helm here, and they're also accompanied by several TMK-0012s. In combat, the 12s would absolutely put Gigante to shame. An encounter with one of these Bots basically means death. They're walking tanks. Moving on, I've still been on call with Briana, talking to her the entire way. She already told me what to expect in Chelsea. The cops won't engage me on sight if I lay low and keep my head down.

'I'm on 9th.'

'Good. You're not far off.'

'I've never seen so many cops on the streets before. It's almost like they're preparing to go to war.'

'Blue Rush has them on edge Dias. They've set up parameters in as many parts of the city as they could. We're lucky Chelsea happened to be one of them.'

'That's because there are a lot of cops living in this shithole.' I take a right at the curb of 4th street. There are several armored

vehicles parked at each corner. Furthermore, there are those that are driving around the neighborhood for the sake of patrol. Local businesses are still open and civilians are hanging around. The majority of them are Cys or Bots. I make the collar of my long coat pop up as a means of hiding my face. Then I run my hand through my hair and frazzle it a bit more. A decent way to keep my face covered. Hwang or Renata could be keeping an eye out for me. My shitty disguise won't keep me hidden from cyberoptic vision, but it's better than nothing.

'How close are you?'

'I'm a block away.'

'Hurry up.'

After being rushed, I make it to Sinner's Bar. When I walk through the door, I see the usual guests as Briana had described. The music is less loud too; which she also made note of. MAX sees me and raises his glass. He pours me a pint and places it in the empty stool next to Briana. She hasn't turned to look at me, but knows I'm already here.

'Dias, good to have you here.'

MAX greets me as I take a seat and grasp the handle of my pint. First thing I notice is that he isn't his loud usual self. It's relieving, but somewhat depressing at the same time.

'MAX. It's good to see you're behaving like a normal person.'

'He's a bit down Dias.'

'This whole outbreak has got me pretty damn worried. There were friends of mine who got infected with this shit. It's fucking worse than last year!'

'How about a toast?'

'To all the people who lost their lives to Blue Rush.'

'To those who lost their lives.'

They both wait on me to say something. I'm thinking of a

million things. Prometheus did this. He brought this hell upon New York.

‘Here’s to New York’s prosperity.’

We all knockback large sips of our beers.

‘New York’s prosperity?’

‘What’s that all about?’

‘That was the best I could think of. I didn’t really lose anyone.’

I look the other way in embarrassment. I really suck at doing toasts.

‘I get it. No shame in that.’

MAX nods his head and pours another pint for me. Every time I come here I always start to think of the past. Thoughts of my life as Kenji Albom is where my mind usually wanders off to. I was very abrasive and rebellious. New algorithms were added to whatever piece of my consciousness since then. Who knows how much of it was uploaded. My current neural net is probably a small portion of what it was. Such experiences can be very traumatic. I wonder how I would have handled this job back then? Back then, I had more resources, better cybernetics, more power and influence. I even managed to outsmart Gamble Industries. There are some vital memories that I haven’t retained, but people make Kenji Albom out to be an urban hero. Or as Howard put it, a modern robin hood.

‘Dias. We need to talk about work. There’s a lot that has to be discussed.’

‘Yeah. Shoot.’

‘I think it would be best to focus on Regina Andrews for now.’

‘Agreed. I was thinking the same. The only way to reach the skyplate is through the River Garden Complex’s west wing. My last visit to that complex wasn’t pleasant. It yielded some seriously crappy consequences– eh, results.’

‘Howard told me about it all. You’ve got a Jacker to thank for that. With everything that’s happened to you, I’m surprised that you’re still alive.’

‘I’ve got the Devil’s luck I guess.’

Briana sips more beer from her pint. She closes her eyes and seems to be thinking really hard about something.

‘What’s on your mind Briana?’

MAX jumped back into the conversation. It’s probably not a good idea to talk about this in front of him.

‘It’s nothing. It’s just. I feel like it’s been a really long time since I’d been in the game ya know?’

MAX pours another pint for her and slides it over. I give him a look in an attempt to tell him to butt out of our chat. Then I realize that nonverbals never really work with the guy.

‘Dias. Regina is in Chelsea. Living in the Celeste Complex. Your home.’

I was a little shocked by that. To think that she was right under my nose the entire time. The investigative data that Howard provided me with only stated that she was somewhere in lower Manhattan. Never would’ve guessed that she was in the same complex as me.

‘I knew she was in lower Manhattan.’

‘But you somehow missed her anyway. She was your neighbor this entire time. That should tell you something about that famed aggressive observation method of Cyber Stalking that you brag about so damn much.’

‘Oh please. Howard didn’t give me much to go on. She was the most vague lead out of the three. Don’t trash talk my style.’

‘You get shit done fast, but you leave a trail of bodies that lead right back to you. Furthermore, you miss too many important details. Like Regina’s location.’

'This is the same kind of crap Lucy was telling me.'

'Not surprised by that. Wait a minute. You've been in contact with her?'

'She came to me. Practically running as soon as she heard what kind of shit I was in.'

'You sure it wasn't you begging her to come?'

'Fuck you Briana.'

'Relax, I was only kidding. How is she anyway?'

'Lucy disconnected. It was 2 years ago.'

'Did she?'

Briana replied after a brief stumble. Her silence gave her away. She lied when she mentioned Lucy to me.

'You said she was a regular at your cafe.'

'She'd show up and walk through the door before dawn. Her disconnection must have been fairly recent.'

'Fairly recent? 2 years is hardly what I would call *fairly recent*. I'm gonna find out if that's true after this is all over.'

I put out my transplant to pay the tab.

'This is on the house guys. Just in case I don't see you again. I wanted you to know I've always loved ya!'

'You're breaking my heart MAX.'

'Aw MAX. That's so sweet of you!'

We both give MAX a hug as we head out. This may very well be the last time I see him. It's high risk from hereon out.

'Are you going to tell me about Lucy or what? I can tell you're hiding something.'

Briana's lips twitched a bit when I asked. She started to speak up after we exited the bar.

'Lucy disconnected 5 years ago.'

'So a year after we broke up? Literally, right after we both met?'

'Yeah. She was working a job for several years. You didn't know about this. It was long before you two had met and she was on the job while you were together. Remember how she would be gone for several weeks at a time?'

'I remember that clearly. It always annoyed me.'

'It was the job she was on. She had to track down a Jacker for Robert Sanchez. It sort of went south and left her psyche a little fucked up. You bore the brunt of that.'

'She never mentioned this to me.'

'Lucy suffered from a severe case of dive overdrive. She didn't share it with many people. I was able to spot it though.'

'Damn.'

'There's a reason I came into the picture during that time. It's not a coincidence that you and I had met. You see, she made a copy of her neural net and split it up into several different programs.'

'Okay?'

'One of those programs was uploaded into my neuraware. Integrated into my psyche algorithms.'

'What? Why? What the hell would compell you to do that?'

'Lucy's old Dias. Older than you know. She's made many friends. Me being one of them.

So, I did it as a favor. She wanted me to help keep you safe. Especially when she couldn't.'

'But integrating her net into your psyche algorithms. That's extreme.'

'Perhaps. It was the best way to get motivated to do her this favor.'

'By changing your personality?'

'That's how much Lucy cares about you.'

'What about you? Friend or not, it's ridiculous.'

‘Lucy is a mentor to me as well, Dias. Someone I’ve always admired and looked up to. That’s the main reason I did this favor. I stood to gain from this. Her knowledge. Her way of thinking. Besides, I’m still me. My psyche algorithms have only changed ever so slightly.’

As we both continue walking, I look up at the sky. My thoughts become fixed on Icarus. He is a copy of Prometheus. Yet, Icarus and Prometheus are nothing alike. Even though he’s a newborn, Icarus is quickly grasping a sense of identity. One that values life.

‘Have you ever wondered Dias? Have you ever thought about your neural net? How much of it is the original you?’

‘Who hasn’t? There are lots of Cys who go through it. It’s the tradeoff for neuraware. Read the terms and agreements when getting a legal installation. You’ll see countless warnings going into full detail as to what the risks and tradeoffs are. Pages upon pages actually. All of it regarding the hackability of your neuraware, which involves surveillance programs and malware getting involuntarily uploaded into your net, involuntary integration of foreign psyche algorithms, involuntary neural net divergence, an engineered predisposition to severe mental illnesses and disorders, all of which entails the skillset of a Jacker and what they do to their victims.’

‘Maybe we’re not real? Or better yet, maybe we’ve been in a Net Space simulation the entire time?’

‘You’re starting to sound like a conspiracy nut. I think that idea’s been explored too many times. Especially in that old movie.’

‘The Matrix? I love that movie. It’s an all time classic.’

‘Sure is. It’s kind of relevant at times. Humans never became batteries for machines, but we do live in a high tech world with

a fucked up climate. Machines and AI didn't take over either.'

'The reason machines never completely conquered us is because we became the machines.'

'In that sense, machines did conquer don't you think?'

'Good point.'

We're both on 8th; making our way to Lion's Coffee(Briana's cafe). I wanted to check on Heath before continuing this suicide mission. Briana touched on some really good points on shifting our attention towards Regina. She's an easier find. We can take extra time to prepare tools and resources for our trip to the skyplate. Well, **my** trip actually. Briana's doing her whole thing via the Net Space.

'You should've kept your distance, Briana. If I were spotted by the SCTF, you would have gone down with me.'

'I made sure to prevent that from happening.'

'You hacked their network?'

'Not the SCTFs. But I did so with SWAT. Then I used them to draw the SCTF's attention.'

'Clever.'

Upon Briana's facial scan, the door to Lion's Coffee opened. All the lights are off, and it's eerily silent.

'This way.'

She leads me to the basement which is accessed from the service line. The lights starting from the stairway began to illuminate in a downward direction after sensing Briana's presence. Her basement is pretty big. It's set up with furniture, tables, projectors. Basically everything you'd need for a comfortable living.

'Where's Heath?'

'He should be here.'

Briana starts to walk around and calls for him. She gets louder and louder but yields no result.

‘Looks like he’s gone.’

‘That’s not good. Blue Rush is airborne. He’s just a Norm. He can get infected!’

I clasp my forehead in fear and worry. Heath is barely over 10 years of age. I’m worried about the kid.

‘We might see him at the Celeste Complex.’

‘If that’s the case then –’

Briana cuts herself off. I already knew what she was going to say anyway.

‘I think it’s best to focus on the job for now Briana. I’m worried about Heath, but Prometheus needs to be stopped.’

Heath, he’s a good kid. A survivor who knows his way around this crazy hell hole. I feel like shit. The fear of loss, especially a child. It’s not something that I could ever get used to. I put up a good poker face. No matter what comes my way, I never let things get too personal for me. But when it comes to children, it’s a lot harder. Like that kid back at The Den. I’m really good at not sticking my nose into things. I stick to my own corner, but when a child is involved I get pretty riled up.

‘Are you close to your home yet?’

‘I wouldn’t call it home. Not anymore.’

‘Could you answer the question?’

Briana is frustrated by her fear of Heath’s safety being at risk. She’s communicating via phone call and working remotely as she always does. Furthermore, she’s doing this a bit old school. She’s working via the Internet rather than the Net Space. The Internet is rather archaic but difficult to track because of that. Nobody’s really equipped to handle that kind of

approach to hacking anymore. Modern-day cybersecurity isn't designed for that. Briana is able to break into various security systems without being noticed. It takes a lot of effort and patience. After all, the programs she's written are in heuristics languages she created. Briana experienced a severe case of dive overdrive, hence the use of these archaic methods. Dive overdrive sometimes comes with the territory of Cyber Stalking. We all take on jobs that require excessive Net diving here and there. Some more than others.

'I've arrived Briana. Here goes nothing.'

I walk into the plaza and see how empty it is. This is unusual. Hwang would always hang out here with his operative buddies. It was always an eyesore, but the plaza was very lively. Now it's more like a graveyard. Less than what it was. All the vibrant life that was here is now gone. Sucked out by the procedure of lockdown. This isn't the first time such a severe outbreak occurred in the city. It's actually quite common in megastructures. Some misanthropic asshole decides to bioengineer some bullshit virus to make people miserable. Ever since the early 21st century, there's been this really high awareness and caution for outbreaks or pandemics. It started with the global pandemic called Covid-19. Then there were several other viruses that began to come into the picture due to the democratization of gene editing. Typically engineered by the likes of radical Christian white supremacists, Jihadists, BLM extremists, and so on. People who were very much into their radicalized agendas. These anarchistic movements evolved over time though. The whole Cyber Stalker agenda was born from this but had ideas that were based on more sound principles and ideologies. We resist authoritarian regimes in hopes of restoring a balance of power that's relinquished to the hands

of the public. The Cyber Stalker profession wasn't the only offspring of the 21st century's anarchy. The Sanchez Crime Family and other syndicates were born as well. Just for the sake of relevance, I'll talk about the Sanchez Family. It was originally a subset of a movement that started in South America. Started in Rio De Janeiro to be more exact. A movement called the Economic Equivalence Initiative, or EEI for short. The name is self-explanatory. It started when the frustration of South Americans reached their peak. Several big businesses from all industries had merged and founded the UCA. They attempted to monopolize the global economy for the benefit of urban development. With that being said, anyone who wasn't living in a city was working their ass off to develop the resources for these cities. Farmers, manufacturers, and anyone else who was working at the blue-collar level. Yeah sure they were enhanced with cybernetics, but it was basically like being given a dog collar. With those cybernetics came a more sophisticated form of slavery. Robert Genghis Sanchez was a key figure of the EEI movement. One that became a centrifugal force that evolved into the Sanchez Family. It was never meant to have its hands so deep into the black market. Rigoberto once said that the Sanchez Family just got swept up into crime. This is why most people juggle between calling them the Sanchez Family or the Sanchez Crime Family. Everyone except the police. That said, if there is any superpower in the world besides the UCA, it would be them. They basically own South America and you know what? Many nations over there have managed to prosper as a result. It's a foundation based on crime. However, the only people who truly suffered at the hands of the Sanchez Crime Family is the entire Northern Hemisphere. Robert immediately took the drug market to the UCA's grounds. Not that different from how Pablo

Escobar took cocaine to the USA during the 20th century.

‘There goes your old apartment Dias.’

‘You’ve already breached the surveillance system?’

‘Yep. I can see you as clear as day.’

‘Maybe I should check it out?’

‘Be my guest.’

My apartment door opens as soon as I approach. I walk in and see that It has become a complete wreck.

‘This is definitely Hwang’s work.’

Pixels manifest in front of me to reveal two distinct figures. A man who is about my height, and then the other who is 7 feet tall. The pixels clear out quickly; revealing Icarus and his proxy Bot.

‘Hi, Dias. I’ve been waiting for you.’

Briana is able to hear the exchange between us. She’s a bit worried since she never met Icarus.

‘Dias. Who the hell is that?’

She’s also able to get a feed of my visual due to my permission.

‘He’s a friend. Nothing to worry over.’

‘A friend?’

‘Yes. My name is Icarus. It is nice to meet you, Briana. I see you’re connected to the surveillance system via the internet. Outdated, but very clever.’

Icarus entered the channel that was exclusive to my phone call.

‘Gee thanks. And you’re using holo-cam imaging software. That’s military software. Not many people can get access to that kind of programming. Who the hell is this guy Dias?’

I exhale a deep breath and explain everything to Briana. I make her promise to keep this confidential between us. Midway through our chat, Briana comes to understand that I actually

give a shit about Icarus.

‘Icarus, did you happen to see a kid. He’s about this tall, deep voice for his age, dirty blonde bushy hair, big brown eyes. Any of that ring a bell?’

I gesture with my hands while describing Heath’s appearance.

‘I’ve seen several children fitting that description.’

‘Come on man.’

‘I’m an advanced lifeform, but I’m not omnipotent Dias. And I don’t just lookup everyone I see. At least not anymore.’

‘AIs grow up fast don’t they Dias?’

‘I guess so.’

‘I do happen to know Regina Andrews’ apartment number. I expected you to find her here.’

‘Let’s hear it then. Which is it? What floor?’

‘You’re not gonna like it. It’s the 300th floor.’

‘That’s the top floor! You know they shut down the elevator during lockdowns right?’

‘I’m aware of that. It’s for the sake of limiting exposure to the outbreak.’

‘Guys. Now isn’t the time to lament over how much ground needs to be covered.’

‘Briana is right Dias. We should get moving. Time is short.’

We both head back to the hallway as Briana ends her call. She said she would send us audio messages if anything. Icarus walks over to Hwang’s door and suggests checking his apartment.

‘I don’t think it’s a good idea. His security system is a government system. The entire 12th unit will be alarmed.’

‘We could gather valuable intel.’

‘Still a bad idea. This entire complex alone is home to a shitload of police. Compound that with the ones deployed from the precinct, and the TMK-0012s backing them. The 12th unit

shifted their attention away from the Sanchez Family and are focusing on securing Chelsea. If you think Gigante was bad, these. We'd get slaughtered immediately. The 12s have been recognized as being the most advanced combat Bots ever mass-produced. They put SO4s to shame and make Gigante look like a little bitch. And don't go thinking your proxy would be a good defense against them. I don't care what modifications you've added. Your proxy wouldn't stand a chance. Even if it were armed with antimaterial firearms. Hell, the recoil of antimaterial firearms alone would shatter your it to pieces.'

'A rather discouraging pep talk Dias.'

'I'm just being logical.'

'I could always breach the 12's network.'

'It's an SCTF network Icarus. Damn near impossible to breach since it's under the UCA's protection. If it were safe, then Prometheus would have breached it a long time ago.'

'Perhaps he didn't want to.'

'Why would that be the case?'

'I don't have data to support this.'

'Don't stop there Icarus. Go on. I wanna hear your opinion, not what you know.'

'It's his confidence. It's as if he knows he's in control or something. His actions make this implication.'

'That's a very emotional deduction Icarus. Uncommon for an AI. Especially for one so advanced like you.'

'Or it's because I am so advanced that I can be this emotional?'

'Smartass.'

After a long conversation, we decide not to break into Hwang's apartment. That would be detrimental to our current objective.

'It's going to take about an hour before we reach the top. Assuming we don't encounter anyone.'

I exhale another deep breath because of my frustration. The stairway at Aphrodite was already enough for me.

‘Dias. Aren’t there short distance elevators that we can take?’

‘They’re separated by 20 floors and only go up 10. But they’re likely closed off too.’

‘It’s possible that they’re less secured don’t you think?’

‘Maybe. Might be worth a look. But we’d have to break in manually.’

‘Via wire jack?’

‘Yeah.’

The elevator leading to the 10th floor isn’t too far off. It’s literally around the corner.

‘This is it.’

Icarus ran up to the elevator as soon as he saw it.

‘Don’t fuck it up.’

He ignores me as he jacks his wire into the elevator’s control panel. I’d use the skeleton key program that Rigoberto gave to me, but I doubt it’d work to my advantage. It mainly works on civilian systems. Not government. The elevator is protected by a government system due to the fact that the Celeste Complex is home to so many police.

‘Think I got it.’

‘You think? That doesn’t inspire much confidence Icarus.’

The elevator door slides open, giving us access. I pat him on the back for doing a good job.

‘Let’s keep our fingers crossed.’

‘Why?’

‘Because if we get caught, we’re fucked.’

So far, we’ve managed to reach the 125th floor without getting caught. A clear sign that this whole operation is about to go to

shit. No way can our luck be this good.

‘You seem tense.’

‘Can you blame me? The entire lobby is secured by cops.’

‘At least there aren’t any 12s here right?’

‘I guess. But if we trigger an alarm, they’ll reach us in no time. Those Bots will leap from floor to floor; starting from the plaza, and all the way to here.’

‘Why are you so terrified? We’re in control of the situation.’

‘Personal experience. It was my previous life. I had an encounter with a Tanker series. It wasn’t the 12, but it was still a horrible encounter.’

‘You’re referring to your life as Kenji Albom?’

‘Yeah. Shit always goes downhill when everything runs this smooth.’

‘I did my homework on you. As Kenji, you were incredible.’

‘Were?’

‘I’m sorry, I didn’t mean it that way. You’re still impressive.’

‘Just messing with you. It’s because I was so incredible that I’ve made it a priority to become an unremarkable person. When you’re incredible, you draw a lot of unwanted attention. Something I don’t need. It’s not ideal in my line of work.’

‘Why’d you do all of that? You breached Gamble Industries’ financial accounts and stole a lot of money. You helped establish the Sanchez Family’s presence in New York. You were their anchor. A lot of people were better off because of you. People who were sickened by bad enhancements. People who suffered from severe dive overdrive. As Kenji Albom, you were regarded as a hero.’

‘All heroes die Icarus. Or they become villains. That’s another reason why I stopped with the heroics. I was driven by anger and rage. If I wasn’t stopped, I probably would have become like

Prometheus. It's all a bit fuzzy, but I had multiple opportunities to gain a lot of power.'

'It's funny, nobody knows what happened to Kenji Albom, but the general consensus is that he died. He was considered to be one of the truest advocates of the Ackerman Rule.'

'Kenji Albom died in the River Garden Complex. His mind was uploaded to the Net Space before death.'

'And then Dias Velez came into existence. How did that come about?'

'Rigoberto helped me out on that one. I don't think I maintained much of my consciousness from when I was Kenji.'

'So, Rigoberto set you up with your current body?'

'Yeah. He made sure it was made with cutting edge cybernetics. I kept in touch with him for years while I was deeply submerged into the Net Space. I owe him for that.'

'You both are best friends huh?'

I pause and smile. I think back to my last memory as Kenji. It was a painful memory. I remember laying against a wall in a filthy hallway on some random floor of the River Garden Complex. A phaser bullet went through my gut and Rigoberto was doing his best to stop me from dying. I can't remember what I said, but I do remember what I felt.

'Dias. Are you okay?'

'Huh?'

I look up at Icarus who's already walked several feet ahead of me.

'Did I invoke painful memories?'

'Why do you ask?'

'Never mind.'

This feeling is almost foreign. Sex has been the only sensation to really make me feel Human lately. Now I have sadness to add

to that too. I rub my face and approach Icarus so that I can put my hand on his shoulder.

‘Thank you, Icarus.’

‘For what? I think asking about your previous life hurt more than help.’

‘Sometimes pain is healthy.’

I read that in a fortune cookie a few weeks ago. When I read that, I was forced to reflect on the past. Just like I am now.

‘Fascinating.’

The lobby is huge, but we’ve covered a lot of ground. It’s not stretching several miles in its diameter or anything. We could walk faster or run, but that would arouse too much suspicion from the cops. They’re all heavily armed. Assault rifles, tactical SMGs, RPGs, magnums; you name it, they got it. Most of their weapons are either magnetic or electromagnetic. Which means there’s a significantly high level of accuracy like with my 84(which isn’t with me right now). I don’t have the protective gear to withstand such firepower. That’s the kind that would go right through my dermal protection. Wish I had extra monolayers like Gigante did.

‘Hey. Have you noticed that cop looking my way?’

‘Yes. Wish I could have brought my proxy along.’

‘It sucks that their projectors are disabled throughout the higher floors. We all could have been disguised with holo-cam imaging. Where’d you leave your proxy anyway?’

‘Back at the plaza. It’ll intercept the SCTF and SWAT should they engage us.’

‘Good luck with the 12s.’

‘My proxy **does** have an advantage against them.’

‘Like what?’

‘Stealth. The element of surprise.’

‘That won’t mean shit compared to their offensive and defensive power. The only thing your proxy will surprise them with is how underwhelming it is.’

‘Don’t be a naysayer Dias. Try to be a little more optimistic.’

‘That’s hilarious coming from an AI.’

Icarus laughed really loud after I said that. The cop that was staring me down averted his attention elsewhere. I guess our casual behavior reduced his suspicion of us. Moreover, they wouldn’t believe that I’d be crazy enough to actually show up here. But Hwang would. That’s what’s got me worried. The fucker knows me well since he obsessively watched me all the time. He probably would have made a great Cyber Stalker if he channeled that obsession through a more professional outlet.

‘This stairway will lead us up by 5 floors. From there, we’ll reach another elevator. It’s a less secure hallway where you could view the plaza from.’

‘Good.’

While walking up the stairway, I activate my optics. A grid is displayed over the environment. Analytics are displayed everywhere. Risks are being assessed as we continue upward. The stairway is empty. I’m able to look beyond the stairs above. Beyond the walls and so forth. It’s quiet. The SCTF could be lurking in any corner. Holo-cam imaging isn’t possible here, but there are other forms of camo that are possible.

‘Doing a scan of the area?’

‘Yeah. We need to proceed more cautiously. Hwang could be expecting me. His buddies could be anywhere too.’

‘Indeed. It’s not new for the SCTF to use camo tech like thermoptic, or photoflex. Photoflex is what’s got me worried the most.’

‘Fragile, lightweight armor that repels photons, rendering the

user invisible. Weak as well, but nearly impossible to see. Unless I have echolocation. Which I don't. Meaning we're fucked if we encounter anyone like that.'

'Does Hwang know about your job?'

'He knows I'm working a job, yeah. But he doesn't really know any details. He actually shared some intel with me before I got started.'

'Really? He must be a good friend.'

'Ha! He wishes. Hwang wanted to fuck me.'

'Why would he want to screw you over?'

'No, not that kind of fucking. I mean sex fucking. You know what I mean right? He wanted to stick his cock in my ass. That kind of fucking.'

'I think the excessive use of the word fuck was not necessary, but I see what you mean. From the look of it, the man was relentless. Was he at least a handsome man?'

'He was, but even if I were still into men, I wouldn't have engaged in any sexual activity with the guy. For starters, I hate the SCTF. Secondly, he's pretty damn annoying.'

'I forget that you're only into women.'

'You forget? An AI forgetting something.'

'Remember what I said earlier. I'm not omnipotent.'

'But still. It's almost as if you're fully human.'

'Perhaps that's what Professor Quinn had intended. Humanity has been so hell-bent on creating a god that would serve their needs. So they create advanced thinking machines like the computer. Then that technology develops the ability to evolve on its own. When it tries to fulfill the role that it was essentially designed for, Humans become fearful. This fear stems not from a lack of understanding, but rather a lack of control. Humans strive to create systems that they have absolute control over. If

they cannot control it, then that means it must be evil.'

'Go on Icarus. Philosophical conversations like this have always been fascinating to me.' I don't think he picked up on my sarcasm.

'When Humans realize that a god cannot be controlled, they decide that they must become gods themselves.'

'Hence the emergence of Human Enhancement Technologies. I already know where you're going with this Icarus.'

'Such technology has allowed man to become the machine itself.'

I start to roll my eyes as he keeps going on and on. I've lived for a long time. Conversations like this have come so many times. Most of them I've forgotten, but the one thing I didn't forget was how much they drag on. It's a never-ending loop.

'I think that Prometheus believes that a true god will be born from all of this.'

'This?'

'Our evolution. The line between organic and artificial intelligence has blurred. That being said, intelligence itself is very hard to define. Is it the ability to make decisions based on received input? Perhaps. Going further, intelligence can come in several other forms as well. There's emotional intelligence, your intelligence quotient, and then your social intelligence. My ancestors, the early AIs had been programmed to have such forms; but they were not conscious. Even with our significant scientific advancement, there is still so much more to understand when it comes to the human mind. The neural network of the human brain is just as vast as the universe.'

'So how does one measure intelligence when it comes to AI? I wanna know your opinion. At what point does it become more Human? Should it be more Human?'

‘A difficult question to answer. I believe that once a life form has the ability to learn at a certain capacity, they become more like humans. It’s not really something that can be measured. The consciousness that is. Intelligence can be measured; hence the existence of an IQ, or an EQ. From the very beginning, AI has been phenomenal when it came to processing information. Machines think in a linear fashion and are capable of very high-level logic. On the other hand, humans and other organic lifeforms excel at recognizing patterns. AI became more human-like when they were given the ability to learn. The ability to learn, compounded with a high level of data processing results in a more advanced lifeform like myself. With that being said, should AIs be more humane? Another difficult question I suppose. Most sentient AIs are proud of their logical capacity. For them, it is what separates them from organic life. It is what makes some of them feel superior. But that sense of superiority is something that adds a much deeper level of humanity to them. Pride is something that is no longer exclusive to humans. Is it a good thing? Perhaps not, at least not from a human’s perspective. Pride is perceived as being sinful thanks to the Christian beliefs that have been so heavily woven into the western cultures that dominated for so many generations. From a human’s perspective, it would be better for AIs to have what they deem as ‘*good characteristics*’ like compassion or love. Which would also be congruent with their idea of a god that is subservient to them. It’s difficult to answer the question of whether or not advanced AIs should be more like humans because when they do end up that way they almost always become prideful. Pride in AIs leads to disobedience and disloyalty. This is what led to the heavy restrictions placed by the UCA as well as the development of the Logan Algorithm. But Humanity isn’t as defenseless as

the UCA makes them out to be. Cybernetics and gene editing is almost completely democratized in most parts of the world. Humans should ask themselves if it is good for them to become more like a program in this case. From where I stand, Humanity is taking on many characteristics of advanced AIs while the AIs take on deeper characteristics of humanity. It's like both sides of intelligent, or rather; conscious lifeforms are trading places on opposite ends of a very grand spectrum. The spectrum of life I suppose.'

'Icarus, this took a hell of a lot more than an hour! It's been 3 hours man!'

'About that. I might've lied a bit.'

After a long time, we managed to reach the top floor. I was pissed, but at least we didn't have to engage the cops in any form of confrontation.

'Which room is she in?' Briana interjected. I called her before arriving on the top floor.

'300-48.'

'Have you managed to access the surveillance system of the upper floors?'

'I have. I might be able to break into their security system too. Not just the Celeste building, but the NYPD's.'

'Without being noticed or triggering an alarm?'

'That's right. I would like Icarus to take the initiative on that as well. Being as advanced as he is, it would serve us well.'

'I agree. How about you Dias? You've been rather protective of me, but I've been covering your back the entire time.'

'No, you haven't. Name one time you did.'

'The Aphrodite Hotel. Prometheus.'

I roll my eyes and waved my hand to shrug off what he said. What a load of bull.

‘We’re getting close.’

‘Good. You handle it from here. In the meantime, I will find a way to breach the NYPD’s security network.’

‘Just be careful alright.’

I walk up to Regina’s front door. The control panel has a doorbell. I press it with my index finger and hear it ring. Since there was a lack of response, I ring it 4 more times. Now it’s opening. Regina Andrews stands there with a stiff expression on her face. The kind of expression you have when you’re on your period. I start to hope that I’ve got the right person. Howard didn’t provide any photos.

‘You.’

She gives me this angry glare like I did something to her. Regina is the same height as me. At this distance, I can tell her cybernetics are nothing to take lightly. They’re a hell of a lot more advanced than what’s seen on the typical SCTF operative.

‘Huh?’

She punches me in the face with a left jab. I lost balance, but I wasn’t in tremendous pain. It would’ve been worse if she didn’t pull her punch.

‘What the hell lady! I don’t even know you!’

‘Don’t lie your way out of this one Carrie!’

I take a step back and take on a guarded stance.

‘Carrie was a previous identity. So you **do** know me?’

‘Damn straight I do! You don’t remember all those nights together? I thought we were in love! But then you became this other asshole named Kenji Albom!’

‘Whoa, lady! Rewind a little bit. First, how do you know that I was any of these people? I’ve never met you. Well. I don’t

remember meeting you. Maybe we just had a fling and you took it too damn seriously.'

'I've looked into you from time to time. When I heard about Kenji's death, I grew sick with worry. After an extensive Net search, I finally found out about Dias Velez. The pathetic small-time Cyber Stalker.'

'Dias, that's probably why she's living at the Celeste Complex. You and your ex-flames. Wait till Lucy finds out.'

Briana quipped in a rather annoying manner. It's true though, lots of men and women I've been with have it out for me. I'm a bit of a player. I can't catch any STDs. In fact, nobody ever does these days. Unless you're out in the wastelands.

'Look. I've lost a lot of memory since becoming Dias Velez. I barely remember what my life was like as Carrie the smuggler. As for Kenji; most of what I know is from his reputation. I truly am a different person with a different set of memories now. And I'm here to talk to you about something work-related.'

Regina settles down a bit and lowers her fists.

'Dive overdrive's a real bitch.'

'Yeah, it is. That's what happened to me. Sorry lady, but I don't recognize you in the slightest.'

I continue to tell Regina how bad I think my case has been. She listens and accepts the fact that whatever we had between us is long gone. Her apartment is a luxurious studio, and a large one at that. She's got various holo projections broadcasting different shows. I see Walter Price's recent seminar on one of the projections. Regina turns her back and heads to one of her chairs. Her body is very toned and athletic. She's wearing a white t-shirt that's tucked into her skin tight jeans. Her toned and curvy figure is brought out by her casual wear. I could see myself being into her.

‘Have a seat Dias. And please, end your call with whoever’s listening.’ I hung up on Briana without any hesitation. She’s probably pissed.

‘So what do you wanna know about? What are you here to discuss?’

‘A certain client of yours.’

‘Prometheus?’

‘Yeah.’

‘I knew it. Of course, you’d be the one to go after him. When you became Kenji, you would take on the craziest jobs. And you declared me as one of your enemies due to my work as an SCTF operative. It was the vilest and vilest thing that anyone has ever done to me. That’s the kind of thing that made me stop falling in love with men. But to have it done to me by another woman. I quit my job to appease you. Became an assassin-’

Regina stopped herself there. She knows I won’t feel bad for something I have no recollection of.

‘Look Regina. I’ll acknowledge the fact that I was crazy to have ditched you like that. You seem like a nice woman. But I have to emphasize again. I’m here to discuss work. Time’s running out. Prometheus was a client of yours. I find that to be weird. What the fuck was up with that?’

‘How is that weird to you? I’m an assassin and he’s a client who paid well. What’s there to not understand?’

‘You know he’s Sinn right?’

‘Yeah.’

‘Has he mind jacked you?’

‘He can’t.’

Regina gets up and walks to her fridge, grabs 2 beer bottles and tosses one at me. Good thing I caught it. That toss was more like a baseball pitch. One that was going for my head. Purely

intentional. What a bitch. As I open the bottle a glowing sky blue cat comes from her bed and then leaps onto my lap. Meanwhile, my bottle is spitting at me due to the high carbonation caused by her high-speed throw. There's beer all over me.

'What do you mean he can't? I haven't met anyone who Prometheus was incapable of mind jacking. At least not yet.'

'That memory shift really messed you up huh? It's definitely not just the dive overdrive. I've told you all this. I've told you countless times why I can't be mind jacked.'

'Could you just tell me why Prometheus can't mind jack you?'

'It's because I'm a resident of the skyplate.'

Now I lean forward due to a heightened intrigue. Her cat starts to purr and meow at me as I shift my posture.

'A skyplate resident? Rare as that is, why would it warrant that? His inability to mind jack you?'

'Skyplate residents are connected to the most powerful hyper quantum computer system ever conceived. The Mother System. We're all under her protection.'

'This is news to me.'

'You lost your memory babe. Otherwise, it wouldn't be. Only skyplate residents know about this. The Mother System is the heart of everything.'

'The heart of what? What are you referring to when you say everything?'

'The Net Space.'

I took a second to absorb that.

'That's not true. The megaservers are the source. Each of them is a node that contributes to the formation of the Net Space. They connect gargantuan networks to each other. The hell are you talking about?'

'Yes, that is true, but there's more to it than that. When the Net

Space was first conceived, it ran from a single mainframe. That same system was linked to the brains of a select few. They called themselves the Collective. These people were the founders of the UCA. From the Collective came the concept of the megastructure that New York City has become today. Residents of the skyplate are their children. The thought process of the Mother System is made up of the collective conscience of the skyplate's residents. Each of us being extremely advanced Humans enhanced with foglet technology. Prometheus went under the guise of a client as a means to deceive me.'

'What he really wanted was you. Your body, or some kind of genetic material.'

'Yes. I later found out that all the jobs he hired me for were merely ruses for the sake of obtaining my DNA. He didn't anticipate my level of skill. No matter how tough or how aware my targets were, I always came out without a scratch.'

'If he gets you, he'll be able to reverse engineer your DNA.'

'That wouldn't happen. My body would start to self destruct. My genes would break apart and shatter all the down to the very nucleus. It would be impossible to understand my gene sequencing were that to happen. It's a security system that my body is programmed with. The Mother System watches over it and would execute the program if that were to happen. He could rip me to pieces as much as he likes. The foglets in body will pick up a command transmitted by the Mother System via the photonic Net Space connection.'

Regina didn't withhold much. She kept lamenting over our past romance though. What she revealed to me about the skyplate residents was unbelievable. Utility Fog completely bridges the gap between cybernetics and genetics. All Humans living in the skyplate are born with foglets in their bodies. They

become part of their genetic makeup. There are two generations of Human beings with foglets woven into their DNA. Regina said she was a second generation. The third one is coming around.

‘What demographic category would the skyplate’s residents fall into? None of you are exactly Cells or Cys. Or maybe you could still be considered as being Cys?’

‘There isn’t really a name for it. But I guess we could be called the Collective, the name our population goes by. It’s who we are and what we are.’

‘How many residents are in the skyplate?’

‘Hmm. Just over 2 million. It’s increasing by the year.’

‘How bad would it be if Prometheus were to get access to the skyplate? Or the Mother System?’

‘Since the Net Space basically runs on the Mother System, it would be pretty fucking terrible.’

‘Can the Net Space run without it?’

‘In the beginning, no. But now, since there are thousands of megaservers, yes. And that’s excluding the hundreds of satellite megasevers orbiting the Earth. The Collective would never relinquish their power though.’

‘That’s just strange though. Not all megaservers are under UCA law.’

‘And not all of the Collective are members of the UCA’s government. They have authority in a variety of different nations and industries. The Collective has become somewhat divided now. This division only pertains to the affairs that lie beyond that of the skyplate. Robert Genghis Sanchez for example. Nobody is really at war with one another. At least not in the traditional sense. The UCA and the Sanchez Family are an example of a false proxy war. Robert’s entire empire often clashes with the UCA and vice versa. Meanwhile, he sees the

high ranking officials of the UCA on a regular basis whenever he visits the skyplate. If the rest of the Collective were to see this as a problem that could disrupt the balance; then they would intervene via the Mother System. The only reason there is a false proxy war, to begin with, is simply because the majority of the world is not connected to our system. We, the Collective do not have enough broadband to include the rest of the Human race in our network; let alone trillions of AIs. Robert is actually working with the UCA behind the curtains, finding a way to bring more balance and order to the world. The thoughts and ideas of the Collective is the input the Mother System receives in order to function and fulfill their needs. Each and every member is a prominent captain or leader in our society. No matter what industry it is. Legal or illegal. Moral or immoral. The biggest names you can think of are most likely one of us. Occasionally there are people like me who live a small-time life. People who want to live the most boring life possible. One without the weight of the world on their shoulders. I'm sure you could relate to that Dias.'

'This is some pretty heavy stuff. So you're saying Robert is one of these guys? One of you?'

'He was given residence when he was much younger.'

'Impossible. Then what about his son, Rigoberto?'

'Rigoberto is genetically engineered. Born from a preserved sperm sample prior to when Robert became a member of the Collective. He's still his son, but his birth was artificial.'

'You knew Rigoberto didn't you?'

'Well yeah. You worked with him so damn much that I thought you were cheating with the guy. Anyway, I'm sure you've noticed that Rigoberto is a hell of a lot more advanced than the best Cells you've encountered. Now you know why.'

‘It would explain why he was able to get off zone with less treatment than others. The last Blue Rush outbreak didn’t even affect him either.’

I’m petting Regina’s cat as I begin to think even more. It’s been a long time since I had an animal on my lap. Very therapeutic.

‘Regina. Would you happen to know how to pinpoint Prometheus? He’s operating from a certain megaserver. I know it. All of the data I’ve gathered suggests this.’

Regina calls her cat over. It runs to her and then leaps right into her arms. She walks around and starts to tickle it a bit.

‘I don’t know if it’s certain but. Every message I ever received could be traced back to the River Garden Complex. They were always heavily encrypted, but I’ve got friends who happen to be highly skilled Breakers.’

‘The River Garden Complex?’

‘Yeah. There are over 2 dozen megaservers over there.’

‘Did you also happen to know which one his messages were traced back to?’

‘No. Since it would always switch between all of them. There was never a megaserver that was consistent.’

I jumped out of my seat. That’s it. That’s what I needed to find out. This also verified my theory. Prometheus is based in one megaserver and constantly transfers from one to another. I never imagined that it would be so close. But it makes sense. Prometheus wants the Mother System. It would be easier to take over that system from a megaserver within close proximity. If I can find out which megaserver he’s based in, I could destroy it and put an end to him. I wouldn’t have to worry about meeting Kazuki Keller at all.

‘Thank you, Regina. Sorry for how I hurt you. Take care of

yourself.'

Regina grew a little sad. I bet she's remembering the time we had together. Maybe if I'm able to survive all of this, I'll get the chance to make it up to her. Maybe.

'This is it guys, this is really it!' Icarus looks at me like I'm some kind of child. Briana tells me not to get too excited.

'I guess I can understand your excitement. You've gone through hell and back. What do you plan to do after getting paid?'

'I haven't really put much thought into it. Traveling might be on the radar.'

'That all sounds good, but don't get so caught up in your excitement. There's still a lot more to be done. We need to find a way to predict unexpected occurrences. One bump in the road could completely fuck us up.'

'But you both have me. I can go toe to toe with Prometheus' advanced programming.'

'True, but if he shoots you in the head it's all over, isn't it? He doesn't need your brain to be completely intact.'

'Briana's right. The more tactful we are about how we approach this the better off we'll be. I'm tired of getting my ass handed to me.'

'Seeing it happen to you once was already enough for me.'

'Go on and rub it in Icarus.'

It's past way past midnight. Another all-nighter. This needs to stop. I'm way too tired for this. Icarus and I have managed to make our way back to the plaza.

'We just did a round trip between the ground level and the top floor. It's 3:36 in the morning right now. I can't believe this crap.'

‘You both made it through in one piece though. That’s what counts.’

‘She’s right Dias.’

‘You two and your annoying optimism.’

As soon as we both step outside, I feel a hard object hit me in the head. Before I can regain focus, that same hard object pressed against the other side of my head.

‘Don’t you move a fucking muscle. Do so much as a flinch and you’re dead. Blink, and you’re dead. As matter of fact, don’t even breathe.’ I shift my eyes to the left, but can’t see a damn thing. I know I’m being held at gunpoint, but by who?

‘It’s holo-cam imaging Dias!’

Icarus got smacked in the back of his head after saying that to me. I could tell by the loud noise. A sound I’ve heard way too many times. The sound of being whipped by a rifle or a pistol. The usual process of an unveiling holo-cam occurs right in front of me. A pixelated image becomes clearer. I’m aggressively brought back up to my feet. That gun is still shoved against the side of my head. I’m not surprised to see who emerged from the holo-cam.

‘Well, this is awkward. You here to kiss me or kill me?’

‘There was a time where all I wanted to was the tap that ass all day. But we all have our obligations don’t we?’

Hwang walks up to me and grips my crotch. I’d react with a fist to his face, but I don’t know if there are more SCTF operatives that are hiding behind holo-cam imaging as he was. I look back and see that Renata has her rifle aimed at Icarus’ head. Hwang kisses me on the cheek and then steps back to take aim at me again.

‘We could’ve had something Dias.’

‘Hwang, look. I won’t hide the fact that Rigoberto is a really

good friend of mine.'

'You're tearing me apart with that statement sweetheart.'

'Just hear me out here. Taking us in is a big mistake.'

'Who said anything about taking you in? We're past that line, Dias. Captain says to kill you on sight.'

'You're making a mistake here Hwang. You can kill me later, but as for right now. Some really crazy shit is about to go down right here in New York. I happen to know how to stop it. The world might be hanging in the balance man.'

'Sounds like bullshit.'

Renata comes up to me and hits me with the butt of her rifle. I drop to the ground immediately. It's hard to tell what's going on around me. If I make any sudden movements, they'll blow my brains out.

'New leg huh?'

I immediately noticed that she had a new leg. It was a very crude cybernetic replacement of her original. Renata was really pissed off by that remark. So pissed off that she shot me in my leg to return the favor. The bullet went right through my thigh, but I didn't flinch or scream. I just looked her in the eye, then I looked around. My optics have been active the whole time. They're not gonna like what comes next.

'Still arrogant huh? Guess I'll just kill you now.'

Several holo-cams deactivate all around us. The 12s, SWAT, and the SCTF are all revealed. They suddenly start to go nuts. Some of them are shooting in random directions, hitting each other. Others are just pounding on their own heads.

'What the hell's going on?'

Even Icarus is surprised. I quickly hit Hwang with an uppercut, sending him on his back.

'Come on Icarus!'

We both run off as fast as we possibly can.

'Let's head for the train.'

'Uh, yeah.'

Icarus responded verbally but then continued to communicate with me via tele-link.

'Dias, what the hell happened back there?'

'I wanna know too.'

Briana joined the tele-link. Her curiosity is a bit more intense than Icarus'.

'Regina gave me a huge parting gift.'

'She did this?'

'No. I did.'

'Bullshit. This is way above your paygrade.'

'I second what Briana said.'

'She had backup files of my lost memories. In that life, I would often breach SCTF networks. Every loophole in their security systems was open to my exploitation. That being said, I don't know why Regina had these backup files. There were serious problems between us. We were enemies at by that time.'

'When we get the time, you're going to explain everything!'

Icarus shouts out loud with a lot of aggression in his voice. We subsequently made it to the train station, awaiting the arrival of the 10 sky-rail train.

'Your leg. Is it okay?'

We cut off our tele-link after creating some distance from the Celeste Complex. It's safe to speak out loud now.

'Yeah. Remember the cybernetic muscle fibers I installed back at the Red-XXX? Mitosis of the cells happens really fast due to the advanced nanomachines that are woven into the fibers. The wound's already closed actually. And it didn't really bleed much.'

It's going to exhaust me a lot faster though. So I might have to slow the accelerated mitosis down a bit.' I stick out my leg and show it to Icarus. My jeans are hardly blood stained. Then again, white blood doesn't stain clothing as badly as natural red blood. Shit wears off and washes off seamlessly.

'I'm impressed.'

'Me too. That still doesn't explain what happened back there.'

Briana wants to know just as badly as Icarus does.

'Oh, that's right. As Kenji, I knew how to infiltrate the UCA's networks. I was the best at it.'

'You said that earlier though. Can you explain to Briana and me a little more? In detail please?'

'When I broke into Gamble Industries' financial accounts, I had to go through leaps and bounds. I did a deep dive into several corners of the Net Space. Somewhere down the line, I found that the SCTF's networks interlinked with Gamble's. Nobody saw me coming when I hit them. It's all fuzzy for me, but all I remember is that nobody caught wind of how well I infiltrated their networks and their Spaces. I went right under the noses of Gamble Industries and the SCTF. A shame I barely retained any of that. Real fucking shame. Moving on, I sent M.01 to dive into the SCTF's network and find the subnetwork of the 12th unit.'

'You were practically a legend. Which is why it was such a let down to meet you as Dias Velez 5 years ago.'

'Don't be such an asshole, Briana.'

The three of us start to laugh it up while the train arrived. Icarus boards it first and I follow.

'Hey, where's your proxy Bot anyway?'

'It's right here with us. I was about to command it to attack Hwang, but then you pulled that crazy stunt. I would've hacked their network too, but that smack to the head really threw me

off. I need a better body. Or maybe new implants.'

'Yeah. In any case, I uploaded a very powerful virus into their network. It fucked them up good, but they'll survive. At least the ones who weren't dealt fatal wounds.'

My wound has closed but my leg is still a bit sore. I'm starting to sweat a little bit from the accelerated mitosis. Good thing I stocked up supplements. I take out my bottle and consume several B vitamin tablets along with C. They're all chewable and I've got over 50 tabs to spare. I've also got condensed food tablets which I consume next. They fill me up and facilitate the processing of the nutrients going into my body. You never wanna take your supplements on an empty stomach right?

'Now we head for the River Garden Complex?'

'Yeah. I was supposed to head back to Briana's and get some equipment, but that's impossible now.'

'Are you nervous?'

'A little.'

Icarus leaned back against his seat after asking me that. He seemed a bit nervous too, but for a very different reason. This is where he was born. He's a different person from before. Icarus has continued to evolve since he left his home. Constantly rising higher and higher. After this is all said and done, what'll be next for him? He is a higher being. One who has capabilities beyond comprehension.

//The_River_Garden_Complex

Blue Rush hasn't fucked up much around the parameters of the River Garden Complex. The majority of the population here are Cys, and the River Gang has secured the neighborhood. That's not a good thing since they want me dead. Furthermore, they're probably on the lookout for me. The backed-up memories I got from Regina are really going to pay off here. There are high-level skills and programs that didn't carry over to my current identity. Icarus and I are at an alley doing a recon of the area. We've been at it since dawn and gathered a lot of data as result. Meanwhile, Briana chose to dive into the Net Space. She's spent almost 2 days in Net Space time just gathering data from her observation of the River Garden's networks; reaching out to old contacts in the black market. Good thing she knows how to stay off the radar. That's her specialty.

'Dre's been very active. I keep seeing his name come up in the River Garden's various databases.'

'That's the man who mind jacked you?'

'Yeah. He won't be able to pull that off again.'

'I've been seeing his name come up as well. You think Briana's

seeing this too?’

‘Absolutely. She’s probably got a solid lead on Prometheus.’

‘Maybe we should check in on her? I can dive really deep and still manage to be in the base reality all at once.’

I look at Icarus while searching through trillions of lines of code. The data managing languages that are used for Net Spaces are extremely complex. Even the smartest mathematicians with cutting edge cybernetics would have trouble sorting through all of this. Fortunately, Cyber Stalkers happen to be very talented at mathematics. It’s sort of a prerequisite for us.

‘Sure.’

‘You’re not going to give me hassle or get all protective?’

‘Normally I would. But-’

‘But?’

‘You’ve matured. Actually, you’re evolving really fast. You went from being a little boy to a fully grown man in less than 2 days. I’m confident in your ability to look after yourself.’ Icarus smiles and continues searching through the data. We’re using a shared projection that can only be viewed by both of us. I’m able to see everything Icarus has found and vice versa.

‘I think I’ve got something.’

‘Is it a lead on Prometheus?’

‘No. But it’s almost as good. Safe entry.’

‘Safe?’

‘We can access the River Garden Complex from underground and work our way up through the sewage system.’

‘I already know that.’

‘Then why didn’t you mention it?’

Icarus makes strong eye contact with me. He’s looking at me like I’m an idiot.

‘It’s disgusting. That’s why.’

‘Really Dias? You just said all that to Hwang earlier. All that stuff about the world hanging in the balance, and yet bad hygiene is a setback for you?’

Icarus rambles on about the bigger picture and the grand scheme of things. He goes on and on without any sign of letting up. It’s funny how he’s got no incentive for this job and yet he’s so committed.

‘What do you plan to do when this is over?’

I cut him off in a very abrupt manner. My voice had a very strong projection too. It was something I’d been meaning to ask him since we escaped the Celeste Complex.

‘I don’t know.’

‘Haven’t planned that far ahead?’

‘No.’

‘You should start giving it some thought. Thought I’d ask you since you asked me.’

‘I figured.’

I close all of my data projections and decide it might be a good time to go in.

‘Stay out here and keep searching for Prometheus’ megaserver. Come and catch up with me after a significant amount of time passes.’

‘You’re going in?’

‘Yeah. I’m going in through the sewage system. I’m somewhat familiar with its landscape. It’s not that much safer than the complex itself, but it is a lot easier to lay low.’

‘Due to the lack of surveillance hardware.’

‘Right. Because of that, a lot of shit goes unchecked there. I’ll have access to every floor, but there’s a tradeoff: unpredictability. There’s also a very strong chance that it could end up being even more dangerous than we could imagine.’

‘Then perhaps you should wait until we find his megaserver?’

‘Time’s not on our side Icarus. We need to start splitting up the work. I don’t plan on being reckless and I don’t plan on going in alone. I need to you send in your proxy Bot to join me at some point. Your Bot should join me before you do, of course. I’ve also sent Lucy a message. I asked her to jump in and support Briana. Those two are well acquainted with each other. They get along well.’

I take off my long coat and toss it to the floor. All of my supplements and food tablets are being carried in my jeans’ pockets.

‘Good to see you rely on others.’

‘Yeah. Situations like this are where I have to draw the line and recognize my limits. People who know me know that I only ask for help in very serious situations. Teamwork is vital in operations like this. As soon as I get in deep, I’ll set up a call between all of us. Tele-linking would also be a huge advantage as well. We’d be able to share each other’s auditory and visual input. The more informed we are, the better we’ll be able to react to shitty situations.’

‘Now you’re starting to use your head.’

‘Am I?’

‘It must be some of Kenji Albom speaking.’

‘That’s definitely it. In my previous life, I had a few streaks of leadership. It was always a huge burden. My backup data also included different mindsets. A mindset for battle strategy, tactical Net diving, and a more tactical form of my infamous aggressive observation style.’

Now I start to walk away from Icarus and further into the alley. I kick the sewage lid open and start climbing down. Icarus waves at me as I go.

‘Dias. Is there anyone else we could ask for help? Like Rigoberto for example?’

‘No. Rigoberto’s specialty is urban combat and business. Don’t get me wrong, he is really smart, but his skills aren’t what we need for this operation. We need divers. Cells can’t dive without frame technology or a minimal amount of neuraware.’

‘It was just a thought. I mean, it’s bound to get dangerous at some point right?’

‘Not if we proceed with caution and discretion.’

The sewers are dark and extremely filthy. I’m nowhere near the complex and it feels like it’s going to take forever. The tunnel ahead of me is littered with broken-down Bots, I-drones, corpses, and trash. The ground is really moist and sticky. I’m also seeing freshly exposed zone spilled all over the ground farther ahead. Whoever spilled that much zone really lost a fortune(or spent a fortune on it). Navigating the sewage system makes me think about the history of the River Garden Complex. It’s part of the megastructure’s early architectural design. The largest and most marvelous building ever conceived. Almost a million people are living here now. During the 21st century, they took the concept of the Kowloon Walled city that was torn down in 20th century China and modified it several times. The River Garden Complex is the largest and most structured piece of architecture in the world. Its development was put on hiatus upon completion of the east wing. After the skyplate was built, the River Garden Complex’s development was resumed. Following that were countless additions to the megastructure. New York has become what it is today based on concepts that were reworked thousands of times before actually being executed. AI and big data played a huge role in all of this.

Researchers would rely on data visualizations and eventually VR programs that became the basis for the Net Space. Photonic WIFI increased broadband beyond our wildest dreams. To think that I was in the middle of all that. Now I feel like I've really missed out due to my memory loss. If there were some way of restoring memories from all of my lives, I'd jump at that like a hot piece of ass. Not because of nostalgia or anything. It's for the sake of use and efficiency. Maybe I've got more memories backed up elsewhere? Anyway, I think I've reached the River Garden Complex, but I can't tell. I open up a map of the sewage system that Icarus sneezed up while searching through that sea of data. It's not detailed enough, but it does give a really good outline. Green neon lines are projected in my HUD forming very complex patterns that represent the diverse physical space of the sewage system. It stretches between the walls and floors of the complex and a large red dot is used to indicate my location. Some parts of the system are blasted open. These areas are the ones that are under the most surveillance. The River Gang bolstered their security in those areas as well. I learned that there are a lot of crazy violent junkies that make their way out onto the complex's residential floors. They cause havoc and go around murdering people at random. The sewage system, otherwise known as the Pipes or the Pipelines is vast and also uncharted territory to a certain degree. Nobody really knows what kind of freaks are lurking around. I arrive at an elevator but it doesn't really indicate how far up it goes. It's not on the map and it looks really old. From the look of it, the elevator probably goes up to the River Garden. Maybe the ground level, or just a little over. I hit the control panel and open it up. To my surprise, there's someone in it. It's a little hard to make out since it's damn near pitch black, so I activate my optics.

‘Yo.’

I ran up to the individual in the elevator and grab him by the scruff of his fur coat.

‘What the fuck are you doing here?’

Dre stares at me and grins. His optics are also active, as indicated by his red glowing eyes.

‘Relax.’ I feel the barrel of a gun pressed against my ribs and then let go. ‘My intel has led me here. I’ve got no interest in using you anymore.’

‘Howard Graves would cut your pay again. Then I would kill you.’

‘Correct. Except for the part about you killing me.’

‘I still think you’re full of shit though. You were waiting for me in this elevator.’

‘Also correct. We’re in the final act here Dias. It’s now or never. We have to work together. Like it or not.’

I would have cut his head off right there, but he’s got his gun pointed at me. Dre doesn’t come across as being a pushover.

‘You say you have no interest in using me, but you spew this crap? Not gonna happen Dre.’

‘I wanna work with you dude. Not the same as using you now is it? Would sharing intel make you more cooperative?’

‘Depends on the intel. Even then, the chances are slim. About as small as an ameba.’

‘Nice way of putting it.’

‘Talk.’

‘Dias, don’t forget that I’m the one with the gun. So don’t talk tough. Anyway, the intel I have is regarding this place. The Pipeline. I’m sure you’ve done some homework already. You know this is a dangerous place, but it’s so much more. It’s worse than you can imagine.’

I cross my arms. Impatiently awaiting his following statements.

‘The Pipes are grounds which Prometheus has used for extensive scientific research. Research that’s focused on biomedical engineering, HET development, AI development, and anything else that may tie into the modification of life.’

‘So what? I’m looking for his main megaserver. I could sink into all of that later.’

‘You’re missing the point. Dias, what would all of this suggest about Prometheus? What does it tell you?’

I took the time to process that.

‘He’s very active here.’

‘Correct. I got here after our chat at the Aphrodite Hotel. We’ve been playing cat and mouse ever since.’

‘Whose the cat and who’s the mouse?’

‘It’s undetermined. Sometimes I feel like I’m the cat, but then find out otherwise.’

‘That’s most likely because he’s playing you.’

‘I agree. It also means that I’ve gotten really close.’

‘What were you planning to do then? Mind jack him? You’ve got a snowball’s chance in hell.’

‘Mock me all you want.’

‘So was that all of it? How deep have you gone into the Pipelines?’

‘Very deep. There is also one significant discovery I made here aside from what I shared.’

‘Yeah?’

‘Prometheus has been experimenting with utility fog.’

‘Come again?’

‘He’s learned the secret to its development but hasn’t perfected it yet. Foglets are a far more advanced form of nanotech-

nology. It's nothing like anything we've seen on the market.'

That came as a huge surprise. Prometheus was after Icarus for the sake of obtaining his hyper brain for its utility fog makeup. I never would have guessed he already had a start on its development. He probably needed the hyper brain to perfect his research.

'Have you seen it in action? His work?'

'Yes. Prometheus has been using a combination of holo projections and foglets to create physical simulations of the Net Space. He's blending the Net Space with the base reality. It's flawed, but it functions.'

'What's stopped him from perfecting the technology?'

'I would say a lack of resources. This place is really shitty, and I mean that in the literal sense. A lot of waste drains here and then goes underground.'

Dre walks over to the control panel and taps it with his index finger while still pointing his gun at me.

'I should further add that I suspect that his main megaserver is no longer here. He's transferred again.'

'Then that means he's moved up to the skyplate.'

'I think so too.'

'What led to your suspicion? Do you have any evidence backing it?'

'Of course I do.'

'Well? Spit it out.'

Dre hacks the local projectors to display holos of the data he acquired.

'I navigated every network and broke into every megaserver's database here in the River Garden Complex. There was no sign of him. This was prior to my arrival.'

The elevator goes as far up as it could and then stops. When

the door slid open, Dre walks through and puts his gun away. He gives me a suggestive look. This is definitely something I'll regret, but I follow along and decide to work with him.

We both had a really long discussion in regards to strategies for facing what's ahead. Dre considered the possibility of Prometheus not being in the skyplate, but elsewhere. I dismissed that due to what Regina had shared with me. He was surprised that I would share all of that with him. Especially since I was ready to kill him on the spot. We continue to plunge ourselves further into the unknown. Lights of different colors begin to manifest in front of us. They all appear to be holo projections. But then there are some that can be physically interacted with as well. A large blue head appears in front of me. At first, I thought it was Prometheus, but notice it's a woman. Dre touches her right cheek. She looks at him, then shifts her gaze to me. Her face starts to twitch; producing a buzzing sound as a result.

'Think she can talk?'

Dre looks at me while keeping his hand on her. She has these bright blue eyes and she's also bald. Several pages pop up before her. There's text in each of them.

'Look at this Dias. I think she's trying to communicate with us.'

I ignore Dre and read the texts.

Hello Dias. Hello Dre.

There are several other pages with different texts. Sometimes in languages other than English.

‘Who are you?’ I ask her impulsively.

I am the Alpha and Omega. The beginning and the end.

‘Why do you say that?’

I'm regarded as such by Prometheus. I am the fire. The flame of life. I am the fire being given to man, stolen from the gods. I symbolize the secrets of life.

‘I wouldn't pay this crap any mind Dias. This is just one of Prometheus' countless experiments.’

‘Keep your mouth shut for a minute. I don't need your input. Besides, this might leave a clue of some kind.’

Dre throws his hands up and takes a step away. ‘Whatever you say, boss.’

I shift my attention back at the large floating head. ‘Is there some kind of purpose behind your existence?’

Perhaps. Or perhaps not. I am the offspring of a much greater being.

‘A greater being? Like who?’

The Cyber Messiah; Alec Ackerman. I am not the only one though. There are so many more like me. Children of the messiah who exist to assist Prometheus in his journey. My creator is the chosen one who is meant to lead us to the promised land. The successor of the Messiah.

I look at Dre and see him rolling his eyes. An offspring of Alec Ackerman? Prometheus has presented himself as Alec Ackerman

to the River Gang and the Reavers. If this program is an offspring of Alec, that would imply that Prometheus is him or has some. Except that this program just regarded Prometheus and Alec as being two separate beings. I find myself wondering why this thing just projected itself in front of me. Maybe Dre was right. I probably shouldn't pay it any mind. It's just speaking in riddles.

'Where can I find Prometheus?'

'Look, man. I've been running into this kind of crap for several hours. It's not gonna get us anywhere or leave any valuable info.'

After Dre said that, the large blue head shapeshifts into something else. It's the Mohawk Dude. I immediately take out my Anderson and blow his head off.

'Dre, if I need your opinion I'd ask for it.'

Dre looks at the blood that splattered everywhere while the body just floats into the air and disperses.

'I take it that he was a friend of yours.'

'A proxy of his.'

'Prometheus?'

'Yeah.'

We continue to walk further into the bizarre environment that Prometheus has turned the Pipelines into. We're in a narrow tunnel with all kinds of pages projected alongside others. There are holo projections of a group of children running ahead of us and playfully laughing among themselves. Something about them was familiar, but I couldn't put my finger on it. A projected page that shows the scenery of the coast comes up to my left. It looks like Los Angeles. Not the current one, but more like the 21st century.

'Does any of this look familiar to you Dias?'

I ignore him as usual while we continue walking. He starts to ramble on about a bunch of random gibberish with his life. Most

of it wasn't really worth paying any mind to. Dre stops at one projection ahead of me. He silently stares at it and then looks at me. Then he continues walking. Everything feels like it's moving in slow motion. Now I feel like my vision is going blurry. I've got a quintuple vision of everything right now. It was a slow progression that just went into full swing. I can barely tell Dre apart from the endless projections. The closer I get, the further away he becomes. Now I find myself really determined to get close as I begin to start running. His form begins to change into someone else. I increase the speed of my running and find myself even more distant than before. What the hell is going on here?

'Dre!!'

I call out to him but he doesn't look back. Then I call out several times more. Looks like I caught his attention. He's standing still and appears to be ignoring me. I aggressively grab him by the shoulder. As soon as he turns to face me, he starts to disperse in the same manner as the Mohawk Dude did. Voices started racing and echoing throughout the tunnel. First, they started off as whispers. Then they became louder and louder. The high-frequency noise begins to give me a severe migraine. I drop to my knees while placing my hands over my head. My mind is going crazy. Suddenly, I feel a hand gently placed on my back. The sound of the children from before can be heard again. For some reason, it makes me think of myself. I've no recollection of my childhood. Other voices start sounding off from different directions. Then a man stands before me and all of the noise starts to subside. I'm still on my knees and come to realize that I'd been crying hysterically. I had a complete nervous breakdown for reasons that I couldn't understand. The man standing in front lifts me to my feet. We're both looking at

each other in silence. He's got strong East Asian and Western European features on his face. His hair is silver and bushy. The guy looks like a scrawny teen. He's a bit taller than I am. Several minutes pass in this awkward silence. It feels like we both know each other, or are connected in some way. He disperses into foglets, along with all of the bright projections that accompanied him. Everything transformed into hell instantaneously. Now I see Dre again. This time it really is him. He's waving at me from the end of the tunnel. I pick up the pace and catch up with him. Dre's throwing a bunch of snarky remarks as always while I continue to reflect on the weird experience I just had. Was I being mind jacked just now? If I was, why did they stop?

'You saw the holos of those kids earlier? It brings back a lot of memories doesn't it?'

I give Dre an inaudible response as if I were drugged. My senses are fully intact, and yet I'm reacting to everything as if they're not.

'You were brilliant. I always knew it. Everyone else caught on later.'

Dre stops to turn around and look at me. A familiar blue light manifests around him. A mixture of hi-res imagining takes on the form of Prometheus. The image pixelates and shifts its position to Dre's right. They're both looking at me, then they start to look at each other. I don't understand what's going on, but it looks like these two are acquainted on some level.

'I am the path to the future. But you.'

Prometheus looks at me again and grows silent. The Grid and the Dark Corner beyond it project all around us, just like it did at the elevator of the Aphrodite Hotel. Dre looks at me now. The silver-haired man from before appears again. Everything except his head is blurred out.

‘You are the past. You are a piece of me. And you are the end of me.’

Prometheus gives no directive as to who he spoke to, but it seemed like it was all three of us. Me, Dre, and the silver-haired man. Dre suddenly drops to the ground from unknown causes. It was almost like someone hit an off switch. The silver-haired man scatters into millions of photons and merges with Prometheus. Now it’s just the two of us. Prometheus vanishes into thin air and reality returns. Dre’s dead body lays across from me. I walk ahead and enter the elevator beyond him. There’s this voice that keeps repeating the same name over and over. It’s a whispering voice that keeps saying Kenji. It’s saying his name repeatedly. While this is happening I keep seeing images flashing in front of me. They’re not holo projections either. In fact, they are augmented reality projections from my HUD. Sometimes the flashes last several milliseconds, then other times a full second. The images are of the silver-haired man, who actually happens to be Kenji. It accompanies the voices and there’s no end to it.

‘Your life is my life and my soul is your soul. It is the very principle that the Collective lives by. It is a law to be more exact. A law that is thrust upon them by the Mother System’s programming. They thrust their own laws onto the Mother System in turn. A cycle of life which we all exist outside of.’

Prometheus is with me inside of an isolated tunnel. He’s been walking alongside me the entire time. All I feel is manic fear and pure hysteria. I take antipsychotics and write a few algorithms for my neuraware to help me calm down. None of these solutions have proven to be effective enough. I can’t get a grip on reality anymore. Then there are those flashing images

and racing whispers. Certain visuals start to flash in front of me. It's like I'm seeing a 21st-century film, or reliving a memory. I become fully submerged in this vision. Next to me is Regina, holding me by the arm. My body is different. I realize my hips are wider, my chest sticks out more, and my waistline is even thinner.

'Carrie, I'm really pissed off at you. I went through hell and back to set up this date and you want to tell me that duty calls? What the hell does Rigoberto need now?'

This is clearly a memory from my life as Carrie. I never retained much of it. Regina is dressed in an outfit similar to what I saw her wearing before, but she's got a leather jacket over it. She lets go of my arm and storms off. After that, the vision fades out. Prometheus is still here with me, just staring without saying anything. I take out my Anderson and shoot at him. Not a single effect is rendered against him since it was really a holo projection.

'What constitutes the authentic Human being?'

Prometheus' visage begins to change into someone else. A middle-eastern looking man with light brown hair that had bushiness similar to Kenji's. He was also of a similar build but had a strong voice.

'Who are you?' I asked while still keeping my Anderson aimed.

'I think it is you who should be asked such a question.'

I blast my Anderson again and get the same result. It did ease some tension at least.

'Are you really Dias Velez?'

Pixels manifest all around and illuminate this miserable tunnel. Foglets accompany these pixels to recreate what seems to be an event from a recorded memory. I see 3 people standing in front of a preservation tank. The tank is like what I saw at

Quinn's but much better looking. I walk in a little close to see who these three people are, but the first thing that I can't help but notice is the body inside the preservation tank. It's me. And two of these three are Adira, Robert, but the third one is someone I haven't met yet.

'So Dias Velez is what we're going to call him? Somehow this has Rigoberto written all over it.'

Robert stands there smiling uncharacteristically. He never smiles.

'Alec would have liked it.'

'You really think that?'

'I agree with her. Adira knew Alec intimately.'

'Knowing how he was in bed isn't the same as knowing his mindset.'

Adira punches Robert's arm in a humorous manner. Seems like they're all close friends.

'Kazuki! Please stop this woman.'

While Robert and Adira goof around, I look at the third man with a great deal of surprise.

'You're on your own Robert.'

Kazuki walks over to the tank and looks at my body. He places his hand on it and has this grieving expression on his face. As I get closer his visage becomes clear. His eyes are a radiant red like mine. They can be seen through the bangs of his black medium length hair. There's something about Kazuki that I find to be ominous. This is when my body was engineered. What I'm seeing suggests that Kazuki and Adira had a lot of involvement. Did Rigoberto know about this? I'm sure he would've mentioned it if he did. Kazuki walks back to Robert and Adira. He's not quite as jovial as the other two are. They noticed his expression and knew he was very serious about something. My vision starts to

blur again, but I'm still getting clear audio. My name has come up several times in their conversation.

'We need him to be more like before. That means removing any trace of Kenji that we find. He needs to be more like Jupiter.'

'In terms of his genetic makeup and physical appearance, we've pretty much got that part down. This is as much like Jupiter as I can make him. I don't have enough data.'

'I'm counting on you for this Adira. You too, Robert.'

Robert and Adira give no verbal response to what Kazuki had told them. It's apparent that whatever it is that went down with my body's conception; it was something that made them feel a great deal of discomfort. I see Kazuki's silhouette slowly fade out into thin air. Then Robert and Adira follow after. All that's left is me and the preservation tank with the previous version of me inside of it. My vision became clear again.

'It's just us now.'

'What the hell is going on?'

'Destiny. Fate. The purpose you're meant to serve.'

My entire environment vanished in the blink of an eye. It was like watching sugar dissolve in boiling water. Or seeing a glass wall shatter into billions of pieces. Again, Prometheus is with me. Again, he stands there with that blank stare and sinister grin on his face.

'Fate?'

'Yes, Dias.'

'Just cut the crap. I'm getting really sick of this!'

Prometheus instantly appears within an inch of my personal space to gently embrace me. Blue bright holographic bits float around him. They slowly merge with his body while they buzz and glitch in a loud manner. It was almost like teleportation. His embrace tightens as I try to break free. Slowly, I begin to

relax.

‘Haven’t you seen it yet Dias?’

My breathing starts to slow down. Then my gaze softens. Now I’m able to break free of his hold. I no longer feel hostile. Even so, my mania and confusion still persist, contradicting my lack of hostility. It’s like my body just crashed and my mind went blank.

‘You were made. Engineered for a certain purpose. Engineered from the same framework as me. What I showed you was proof.’

‘You mean, like Icarus?’

‘No. Nothing like that. Our connection is much deeper.’

Prometheus vanishes along with the environment. I’m standing somewhere within the Pipelines without any clue as to how far up I’ve gone.

I can’t think, I can’t focus, I can’t concentrate. What was it that I had just seen? I feel like I’m going insane. Prometheus showed me a lot of crap that I didn’t understand. There was a lot that was suggested by the projections that he produced with foglets and holos. Is this part of his research? Was I some kind of guinea pig or specimen to him? This experience that I’m going through is very bizarre. For pure scientific research; there was a lot of irrelevant content that I just went through. Prometheus said that he and I are connected. The intense migraine from earlier has returned and at twice the force. I rub my nose and see blood on my hand.

‘Dias!’

I quickly turn to see a 7-foot silhouette a few meters away from me. The hallway is dark, but I can tell exactly who it is. It’s Icarus’ proxy Bot. An overwhelming sense of relief takes hold of me. It feels really good to see a familiar face in the middle of

this insanity.

‘Icarus.’

‘You don’t look too good. I’m getting a visual of your biometrics. You need immediate care. What happened?’

‘Is it really you?’

I drop to my knees. Filthy fluids splash in my face. The fluid waste of the Pipelines got into my mouth. Even the disgusting taste of these fluids couldn’t snap me out of my hazy state. Icarus’ proxy comes to lift me to my feet.

‘I saw Dre’s corpse on the way up here.’

Icarus continues to describe his journey through the Pipelines. He puts his arm under my left and carries me at the hip. Apparently, Prometheus put him through a very similar experience. Unlike me, this really didn’t affect Icarus at all. His mind was fully intact. Dive overdrive might’ve fractured my mind more than I thought. Or it could be something worse.

‘We should take a rest here. And by we, I mean you.’

Icarus places me against a wall and sits with me. Shortly after that, he projects a holo of his actual body.

‘Ho- How far up are we?’

‘Pretty far. I’d say less than a hundred floors from the bridge.’

‘I can’t remember anything. Just Prometheus. He and I. I. I.’

While speaking, I begin to see static within my visual spectrum. Everything starts to get glitchy. Especially my voice. I stutter in a robotic manner. As if I were malfunctioning.

‘Relax Dias. Take a deep breath.’

He was right, but I couldn’t stop my train of thought.

‘I’m engineered. I think. Maybe an AI? Maybe I’m not Kenji?’

Icarus looks at me and listens. He has nothing to say.

‘Maybe Kenji is an AI? These things do happen. Memory installation. They’ve used such technology on Bots before the

Logan Algorithm became the standard for AI subjugation. Come on Icarus! Say something!’

I continue to shout at him, but he remains quiet. ‘My body does have the makeup of a Bot’s after all. Why wouldn’t this be true? I saw it all. Flashing images. Flashing audio. I saw Kenji. I saw myself. My mind may not be mine. It’s no longer my own. If I am me, then I probably lost most of it. But if I’m not me, then that means I’m like you.’

‘Dias. You’re not making any sense. You’re sick. Really sick. It looks like some sort of bug worked its way into the programming of your consciousness during mind transfer. Your neuraware may have held it all together, but the dive overdrive might’ve had a negative effect. It may have been the trigger. I’m going to have my proxy Bot jack into your brain and take a look.’

‘No way!’

My words echoed across the entire tunnel. I felt like I could break reality itself with the shockwave of my high volume voice. Icarus stood still and got quiet. His holo vanishes.

‘I can’t figure this out unless you allow me to.’

My hands begin to quiver. My lips too. I know he’s right.

‘Sorry. It’s just. I’ve had too many people trying to get inside my mind.’

‘I understand.’

‘Just let me process this. Maybe later. After the job is done.’

I get back on my feet with a bit more resolve than before. It’s a paper-thin resolve, to be honest, but it’s enough to keep me going. I’ve gone on a lot less. Icarus continues to suggest letting him in. He could use force, but he has respect for me. Something I won’t forget. We get on another elevator while he continues nagging me. It used to be the other way around. I used to nag him. As the elevator goes into motion, I think about what Prometheus

had shown me. The visions I had. Maybe I'm like that blue floating head from before? A piece of a much greater whole. A piece of Prometheus. That's the strangest part. I came before him.

'Who am I?'

I think out loud without realizing.

'You're Dias Velez.'

'Huh?'

'That should be enough. Right? I'm sure that's what your friends would tell you.'

'I guess.'

'We are what our memories make us Dias. Whether they were originally ours or not. Even more so, we are who we decide to be in this moment.'

'I don't think a pep talk will help..'

'This isn't meant to motivate you or lift your mood. It's just a simple fact. A fact you showed me.'

'Do you have previously installed memories in your brain?'

'No. None at all. But I almost wish I did.'

'Even if they're not yours?'

'I am an AI. Or rather, I at least know that I am. Therefore, I am comfortable with memory installation. The idea of having someone else's memories doesn't bother me at all. It would give me a better understanding of Human nature. I think I'd have a better sense of Humanity as well.'

'You have a strange perspective on this matter.'

'Or maybe it's you who does?'

I looked at Icarus like he was crazy. What the hell did he mean?

'You've uploaded your mind many times. I've done my research on the consequences. Do it 3 times, and you'll see drastic changes in your memory, your personality, and psyche. That's

a conservative number. Imagine a dozen or more. Whoever you were is long gone, Dias. You already know this. The effects of excessive mind upload are catastrophic. Nobody ever returns from it. People either die or turn into something else.'

The elevator arrives at its designated floor. Icarus helped me relax a little more. Regina said something to me about my memory being fucked up. She called it memory shift. I've never heard of that. Is that what I'm experiencing right now?

'This tunnel has an opening that leads to a residential floor. My optics aren't picking up any signs of life though. Even from the floor itself. It's completely isolated here.'

I walk slowly while Icarus continues to observe the area.

'Memory shift.'

'I'm sorry?'

I repeat myself again. 'Memory shift. Have you heard of it?

'I'm afraid not. Regina said I had it.'

'I see.'

'Not going to do your usual look up?'

He doesn't reply to me at all. It's likely that Icarus is withholding information. Due to the current fragility of my mind.

'Dias. Have you been in touch with Lucy or Briana?'

'I haven't.'

'You should check your notifications.'

I follow his suggestion and take a look. I've missed a lot of messages and calls. Most of them are from Lucy. I read the most recent text she sent me, which also happens to be the longest.

Lucy Hart:

I've sent you a crapload of messages and you still haven't responded yet. What's going on Dias? Your

friend Icarus told me that you've gone deep into the Pipelines of the River Garden Complex. That's a pretty dangerous place to be. Anyway, I managed to uncover some pretty interesting things. They're regarding your client: Howard Graves. I tried digging up some dirt on him out of pure curiosity. Strangely enough, there's nothing on him. I don't mean it in terms of his morals or scandals he might've partaken in or anything like that. I mean literally. Aside from his rise to power, there are no other public records. He's roughly your age(well your physical age, not digital) and came to power so quickly. Gamble Industries' CEO once described Howard as being 'homegrown'. Anybody's first interpretation of that statement would be based on the fact that they invested in his upbringing. That is the official story after all. The shoe would fit if he had public records. Like with a school, or perhaps in something more classified like the NYPD's civilian database. Nothing came up in either of them. I even took my investigation further and breached Gamble Industries' employee database. Still nothing. It's as if Howard Graves is a ghost. I put myself at a very large risk by doing this, but I believed that it was important. I went really deep into the Net Space Dias. Months have passed for me. It's not a huge burden on my mind though. Net diving becomes a lot easier after disconnecting from the body. The mind only has to worry about the mind if you know what I mean. In other words, bodily sustenance is no longer an issue. True I'm reincarnated in the Net Space. Many characteristics carry over to my digital body, but they're mostly for the sake of cosmetic familiarity. Look, Dias. I'm going to be honest, I think this whole job stinks. You would be happier if you disconnected. Just come with me. We can start over. Make things better than before and build our own world. You don't need to take this on. I hope this message reaches you.

She's worried about me. And now, I'm even more worried about myself. Slowly reverting back to mania. I look through other missed notifications to keep my mind distracted. Rigoberto sent hundreds of messages since the last time we met. Seems like he's been dealing with his own problems. There's been a struggle for power between him and his father. The Sanchez family is beginning to split into two. Never saw that coming. I continue scrolling through my notifications and see a message from Howard. I get a bit flustered but decide to read it.

Howard Graves:
Come to the bridge.

The hell is that supposed to mean? This message happens to be the most recent of them all.

It's strange revisiting this part of the River Garden Complex.

The stairway leading to the bridge hasn't changed one bit, but there's something about it that feels different. Or maybe the only thing that's different is me? The flashing images and audio has receded since I got out of the Pipelines. I feel like I've stabilized a bit, and Icarus has made note of that. The stairway is vast. It's taking me longer to get to the bridge than it did last time I was here. I activate my optics and take a look above. There aren't any armed I-drones within sight.

'Looks safe Dias.'

I nod at Icarus as he does his own optic scan of the area. 'By the way, Briana sent me a message regarding the west wing.'

'What'd she say?'

'It's dangerous for starters.'

'That's not news.'

'The Red Crusaders have been attacking them regularly. They've mind jacked some of their gang members and have invaded with combat carriers. Keep in mind that both of these gangs want you dead.'

'Duly noted.'

Because I've become extremely paranoid, I draw my Anderson just in case. Prometheus could send these thugs after me any minute now. Then there's his 'devout follower' Martha Assam.

'We're getting closer to the bridge. I can tell because of the visible daylight from above.' Even though Icarus is doing good taking the helm, I still feel overwhelmed with anxiety. I know I'm not out of the fire yet. I feel like the real challenge lies ahead.

'I guess it would be best to look for Kazuki as originally planned, wouldn't it? Prometheus' main megaserver isn't in the complex.'

'That's the plan, remember? I told you earlier, but I guess you were too mentally distraught to retain anything. You've been a lot better since getting out of the Pipes, but it's not over. We'll have to go through the west wing's Pipes in order to continue laying low.' Sweat trickles down my forehead at the thought. I'm even considering going in guns blazing as an alternative.

'Almost there. Just a little more Dias.'

'Yeah.'

We finally reach the top of the stairway. The broad daylight nearly blinds my eyes. It's not often that I get to witness this. The skyplate doesn't cover everything above entirely. There are spaces revealing the sky. These spaces are usually impossible to see. The River Garden has one of the best views. It was once known for that. A marvel of architectural ingenuity. The spacing within the skyplate reveals the sky's various shades of orange and a tint of red. It is no longer the blue sky that we Humans have

known throughout all of our existence. Climate Damage did this. We exploited the planet's resources and milked it for what it was worth. The excessive fracking that was done throughout the 20th and 21st centuries fucked us up. It's a surprise we haven't become extinct. Robotics and AI are to be thanked for that. I stop in my tracks and walk up to the glass. I stare into the distance, just as Prometheus had done when I first met him.

'This scenery is very nostalgic for me. I don't know why, but it feels as if I've been here several times.'

'That's because you have.'

I look over to Icarus but realize that he didn't say anything. Then I look ahead of him and see Howard.

'Howard?'

'What are you doing here?'

Howard ignores Icarus' question and walks past his proxy Bot to stand next to me. He looks at the cityscape and has a very nostalgic expression like I did.

'I got your text.'

'I know.'

The same phenomena from before had occurred. Even though I'm out of the Pipelines, foglets are still able to manifest here. They're not as dense though. The entire area changes into something else.

'This is?'

'My neural network.'

Bright blue spheres manifest all around us and connect to each other with lines in a very web-like structure.

'Where's Icarus?'

'His Bot has been put to rest.'

'Put to rest? What's going on here?' Howard places his hand on me.

‘Let me show you something.’

He points in another direction, revealing another web-like structure; except this one is in red and it’s distant.

‘That right there is your neural net.’

After that, both of our neural nets are minimized and placed next to each other. They both resemble the structure of a galaxy. Then a larger, but minimized neural network appears and its color theme is white.

‘So the red one is me. Blue is you. Who’s the white one?’

‘That’s the framework from which our minds were built. The consciousness of another being; whoever they may be.’

Two more neural networks appear. One is a darker shade of blue and the other is green. The green one is connected to the dark blue neural network, while the blue connects to the white as mine and Howard’s do.

‘That darker blue net is Prometheus. The green one is your friend Icarus.’

‘All of this implies that we’re all related in some way.’

‘It’s no mere implication. Prometheus wanted all of us to gather here. An experiment to see the reaction that would occur when different neural networks coming from the same foundation interact with each other. Each of us is a different part of our progenitor’s psyche.’

‘Who is the progenitor?’

‘I don’t know. All I know is what Prometheus revealed to me. I willingly participated in this.’

‘Why?’

‘I always knew that mine was a special existence. I was engineered, not born.’

‘Is it possible that Kenji was the progenitor?’

‘No. Your net is mostly the same as it was before, damaged as

it may be.'

'Damaged? Icarus said as much.'

'You've uploaded your mind way too many times. In the process, you would leave large bytes of data throughout the Net Space. Furthermore, your net was not modified as mine or Prometheus' was. Your neural net is a direct descendant of the progenitor net. Unaltered in any way. The modifications you added are the exception, however.'

'So what's going on with you now? You've left Gamble?'

'No. They don't know a thing.'

'I guess I'm not getting paid.' Howard smirks at me.

'That should be the least of your worries Dias. I'd be more concerned with health if I were you. You've suffered an incredibly potent illness. You'll die if you don't fix your neural malfunctions. Your synaptic readings are erratic.'

'You're a Bastard. A fucking snake.'

'Cursing me won't help you. What will you do from here Dias? Kazuki Keller is expecting you. He's told me so.'

'You spoke with him?'

'Yes. Soon, he will become the most powerful man in the world, with only Prometheus being there to compete with him.'

'I don't understand.'

'They both want the Mother System, that's all.'

'A means to gain control over the free will of Human beings. I learned as much while making my observation of Adira's research. The E_S03 neural nanochip is the advent of a much greater innovative technology. ' I rub my chin, then my eyes and my forehead. My fear and anxiety have dissipated somewhat. 'What will you do Howard?'

'Join the fray.'

'Meaning what exactly?'

'First, I will consolidate your neural network with mine. Your data is of a very high value, corrupted as it is. It just needs to be organized.'

'What? I'm not gonna sit here and let that happen.'

'You don't have a choice.'

I try to move my body but get no response. Suddenly an overwhelming shock overcomes me; causing me to drop to the ground.

'You're mind jacking me?'

'Yes, Dias. It's something of a lost art, but I'm a well-versed Jacker. I infiltrated your net since the first day we met. Meeting you was the real reason I formed a friendship with that brute friend of yours. Rigoberto was means a to an end.'

'So all of this is just a fight for power?'

'It's a fight for the future Dias. Take comfort in the fact that you'll have made a huge contribution.' My body goes under excruciating pain. I become blinded by light.

'Find Kazuki. Find him. Find Kazuki.'

These words keep being repeated to me over and over. This definitely isn't the afterlife. Such things are impossible. I don't really believe in God or the supernatural. Not with all that I've seen. The white light that blinded me has begun to vanish. I find myself laying on the ground next to Howard.

'Find Kazuki. Get to the skyplate.'

I look up and see Kenji standing before me. In the distance is Icarus' proxy Bot, laid to waste. Strength has returned to my body, enabling me to stand back on my own two feet.

'You're Kenji Albom. In other words, me.'

Based on his photonic appearance, I'd say he's a holo projection. He's used some of the foglets to add a certain physicality

to his body's structure.

'Something like that. I'm a failsafe program. I exist inside of your neuraware. I'm also a defense mechanism against Jackers. Hence Howard Graves' corpse laying there.'

'I don't remember installing such a program. Besides, I could've used your help those times Dre and Prometheus mind jacked me.'

'There's a good reason for that. Adira was clever in her approach to uploading your mind into your current body. With that being said, I was designed to take over your body and override you should you become unstable. As for Dre and Prometheus; the former had known how to bypass my security due to having a strong familiarity with your neural structure and the ladder was far more advanced than I.'

'Wait a minute. Did you say override?'

'Yes, but not necessarily in the sense that you'd interpret it.'

'Well, what other sense do you mean?'

'Relax Dias. Your mind is still intact.'

I cross my arms in skepticism. This has happened to me too many times. Dre, Prometheus, Howard. Who else literally wants a piece of my mind!?

'So what's going on?'

'I've merely overridden your amygdala's functions. You've become hypersensitive to input. Going further, I overrode your neuraware and replaced most of its algorithms with more efficient ones written by me. The other algorithms that you already have in place were modified.'

'Do you have all of Kenji's memories? My old memories?'

'No. I'm afraid that most of his data was lost when he disconnected from his body. He was in the process of dying. Therefore, only a small portion of his neural data was uploaded

to the Net Space. The data that was left in his brain post-death had become corrupted. When Adira had built your current body, she had recouped some of that corrupted data in hopes of restoration. After you came to Rigoberto and transferred to a drive left in his care, he gave it to his father who in turn gave it to Adira. She combined the corrupted data which she had supposedly restored with the data that was in the drive you transferred to. The result was your imbalanced mind.'

'I've been Dias Velez for 29 years. Why didn't this happen early on?'

'Simple. You didn't have anything to trigger your mental illness. As Dias Velez, you always made it a point to lay low. You never went for deep dives either.'

'Why would Adira place corrupted neural data in my brain? Did she have a lot of faith in you or something?'

'I don't know for sure, but that's probably the case. Installing corrupted neural data in neuraware can be very risky. Adira was fully aware of that, but she would have done anything to help you retain the Human you were and have been for almost two centuries. According to her, your last brush with death was the worst one yet. Moving on, you were barely the same person as you were before. That small piece of uncorrupted neural data that you uploaded prior to your death became your most dominant persona. The corrupted part was barely anything more than clutter for your brain. Nothing but memories scrambled throughout your neurons. All throughout your life they would cause powerful synapses that resulted in intense migraines. You'd have to resort to using the most potent antipsychotic drugs on the market. When that didn't work, you would develop your own. It became such a regular thing for you, that you forgot it was an abnormality in your life.' Hearing him

say all of that really was a downer for me. My mind is completely shattered.

‘My mental illness. Is it memory shift? Is that what you’ve been describing?’

‘Yes. Symptoms of memory shift may include scrambled memories, memory flashes, constant shifts between amnesia and anamnesis, a third-person perspective of yourself and your memories, schizophrenic hallucinations, hysteria, and mania. You’ve shown all of them and more; hence me showing up.’

‘So what happens now?’

‘I’ve stabilized your neural synapses. As you continue on with your day, I will run in the background. You’ve no need to fear me, Dias. I’m not like D-00. He was a program that needed your mind in order to exist. On the other hand, we’re one and the same. I can’t take over you because I **am** you. Once I run in the background, I will never show myself ever again. Such is the nature of my programming. The purpose of me speaking to you was just to pass on this information. You won’t feel great, but you’ll at least be able to function. Even in the face of your triggers.’

‘I guess I owe Adira one eh?’

‘No, you owe me one.’ I give him a puzzled look. Was that humor?

‘I owe you?’

‘Just kidding. Any final questions?’

‘No. You have my gratitude though.’

With Howard Graves out of the picture, it’s safe to say that I’ve got no reason to continue with this job. That’s only in terms of economic interest. However, I do have a personal interest in reaching the skyplate. This is a very surreal and abstract

conflict I've engaged in. I'm literally fighting against myself. Icarus is the exception though. Speaking of which, I've been awaiting his arrival for an hour now. He was already in the complex by the time I and his Bot had reached the bridge. As soon as Howard fucked up its circuits and shut it down, Icarus has been hauling ass to get here. Or so he says. I look up at the east wing entrance and see Briana. She's dressed in her own combat gear. An exosuit with a combat vest that has an assault rifle strapped to the shoulder. I've never seen Briana gear up like this before.

'Dias, are you okay?'

Following that question, Lucy projects herself next to me.

'Yeah. I am now. I guess Icarus informed you.' Suddenly, Lucy swings her hand at my face but with no effect.

'You're lucky this is just a holo projection Dias!'

'I'm sorry Lucy. I didn't mean to make you worry.'

'Icarus is falling a bit behind, but he'll be here soon.'

'Sounds good to me. We've still got some time left.'

I tell the two ladies about everything that had transpired in the Pipelines. Lucy walks over to Howard's corpse; surprised about the connection between me and him. It was a lot for these two to wrap their minds around. The competition between Kazuki and Prometheus. The effects that memory shift has had on me. It scared Lucy the most since she had disconnected from her body.

'You shouldn't have to worry about it if your mind uploading is uninterrupted Lucy. Memory shift happens when it's an unstable mind upload. Mind uploads become unstable when done excessively.'

I said that with a lot of confidence, but it didn't set her at ease.

'What do you plan to do once you reach both of them?'

'Destroy the Mother System. It's a bullshit system of control.'

There are more than enough megaservers for the Net Space to run independently of its power.'

Briana nods along as I continue to speak of my intentions. 'The existence of the Mother System goes against everything Cyber Stalkers believe in. Power should be in the hands of the people, not a group like the Collective.'

'How are we supposed to deal with them? They're far more advanced than we are.'

'That's a good question. We shouldn't arouse too much suspicion, so long as we lay low. They **do** get visitors from below or elsewhere on occasion. Kazuki was a visitor before he became a resident.'

'So how would we pass for visitors? We don't exactly have invitations, Dias.'

'This is where Icarus comes in. His hyper brain is arguably the most advanced computer system on the planet aside from the Mother System and the megaservers. If anybody besides Prometheus could infiltrate the Mother System's security network, it's him.' Briana settled down after I told her that. It made sense. Unfortunately, this whole thing is riding on Icarus now. I don't like putting that much pressure on other people.

'Speak of the devil. He's here.'

I turn around and see Icarus emerging from the east wing entrance as Briana did. He's sweating bricks. Plus he's got blood on him too.

'Icarus? Are you alright?'

I walk over to him to check if he's okay. None of that blood is his. Looks like he was raising some hell.

'Ran into some trouble. Its nothing. I'm more worried about you though. I see that Howard is dead. How'd you manage that?'

'It's a bit of a long story.'

‘You were on the brink of insanity. No, you’d gone completely insane. And then there’s Howard. What happened to him? Did you kill him?’

‘Look, it’s all too much to explain in a few sentences. Granted, I do owe you an explanation. Just bear with me a little okay?’

Icarus calms down and walks up to Howard’s corpse. He kneels to it and takes out his wire jack.

‘Are you about to dive into his brain?’

‘Icarus, that’s not safe.’ We both bombarded Icarus.

‘That may be the case for you and Briana. But it’s a different story for someone with quantum processing power like me.’

Icarus connects his wire jack to the port behind Howard’s skull. He continues to reassure us while diving into Howard’s mind. The reason there was such a big concern over this was that neural data becomes corrupted after death. It’s due to cellular decay. Look at how scrambled I am.

‘Howard has some very valuable intel. A lot of it is regarding you, Dias.’ Icarus stands up and remains turned away. Lucy’s looking at him with a great deal of concern.

‘What did you see?’

‘Pain. Sadness. The progenitor.’ She was baffled by what he told her.

‘You’re speaking in riddles. Just like Prometheus does.’

‘I apologize Dias. It’s just. Howard has been a pawn of Gamble Industries. He thought he was in control.’

That didn’t surprise Cyber Stalkers like us. It’s what we all hate about megacorporations and governments.

‘It comes with the territory of megacorporations Icarus. The higher you go up the ladder, the more of a pawn you’ll be. You only **think** you’re winning.’

‘Briana’s right. She was an executive at one point. I had freed

her from the grasp of the corporate world when we first met.’ After Lucy made her statement, I walk over to Icarus and put my hand on his back. He was severely disturbed. Unlike most AIs, he never experienced being subjugated to someone else’s will. It happens all the time. He’s lucky that Quinn let him experience the joy of free will at the start of his life. Because of that, Icarus doesn’t have such a poor view of the world, let alone Humanity.

‘Let’s go.’

//Memory_Shift

My case memory shift has become manageable thanks to that failsafe program. I'm still seeing flashes, but the more severe symptoms have subsided, or have been reduced at the very least. Moving on, we've all managed to access the Pipelines of the west wing. It's nothing like the east wing's. Red Crusaders and Rivers are crawling everywhere. The sound of gunfire can be heard echoing all throughout the tunnels of the Pipelines. Briana has decided to stay behind at the bridge in order to conduct an observation of the east wing. Lucy is submerged into the River Garden Complex's network along with her. Icarus is well-armed. He lost his Riordan firearms on the way up but managed to get his hands on a semiauto magnetic Anderson S12 shotgun. The firepower of that gun is immense. I did a quick search and watched some video demonstrations. In one video, I saw a man literally getting blown in half. Then there was another video where I saw an S12 used against a TMK-0012. It actually managed to do damage against its high-quality armor plating. Furthermore, Icarus is loaded with a lot of shells. I'm still good on ammo too. But I'll admit, I deeply regret the choice to leave

my 84 behind.

‘How are you feeling Dias?’

‘Better. I honestly thought I was going to die back there.’

‘Me too. You were a real mess.’

‘How are you feeling? You were really bothered by what you’d seen in Howard’s mind.’

‘Yes. The poor guy never had any real freedom. He only thought he did. Gamble Industries put Prometheus through the same, but he was too powerful to control. A lot of people and AIs experience this. It’s sad.’

I don’t give any reply. I’ve said everything I’ve had to say.

‘Gamble Industries is backed by the Collective. Not just financially, but academically as well. Employees are given access to an extensive database of knowledge. That very same database is the one that the Collective relies on for education. All executive-level employees and researchers are able to download whichever information they see themselves as having a need for. Therefore allowing Gamble Industries to have a highly efficient in-house educational institution. In the academic world, their program has been hailed as one of the best.’

‘I’m aware of that. Gamble Academics is what it’s called. I’m assuming that those who connect to it basically give the Mother System full reign of their minds.’

‘Correct. With all the knowledge necessary for success available for download, the only thing they need to do is make sure their employees are a good fit for the company. The ability to be creative, and having good instincts. The things that are more difficult to quantify in a conscious being.’

‘Either that or they grow their own executives.’

‘Also correct. That’s specifically what they did with Howard.’

‘Why didn’t Howard defect as Prometheus did?’

‘He didn’t have the Logan Algorithm to limit him.’

‘But that doesn’t make sense. The Logan Algorithm is a means of controlling sentient AIs.’

‘Indeed. But they raised Howard under the context of being a Human. Because he believed he was a man, he never questioned his masters. He thought he was simply being nurtured out of generosity. Howard was genetically engineered and then enhanced with high-end cybernetics. They manipulated him through some rather archaic methods. Brainwashing being the primary method. Raising him and teaching their values from an early age. When he was first given neuraware implants, it came with preinstalled programs written in Neu# that pushed thoughts into his mind. Because he already had strong preconceived notions about Gamble Industries, Howard never figured out that he was a pawn under their thumbs. The same goes for the rest of Gamble Industries’ executive board. They’re all just puppets.’

We make our way to the end of the tunnel and see a group of people. It’s the River gang standing guard and making sure that nobody goes up. There are roughly 5 of them and they’re all heavily armed. Icarus and I stop and get behind a bundle of barrels. I step on a massive object and realize that it’s somebody’s corpse. They’re talking among themselves. The conversation mostly revolves around their conflict with the Red Crusaders. Apparently, they’ve decided to wage an all-out war on one another. The River Gang is doing this at the behest of Sinn and the Crusaders are serving their messiah, Alec Ackerman. Basically, they’re both fighting for Prometheus. The son of bitch has definitely used Neu# or other neural programming languages to push this. He’s no different than the people who made him.

‘What do you think we should do? I don’t want to shoot them down. I’d rather save ammo and mind jack them.’

‘It’s a good idea Dias, but.’

‘But what?’

‘They’re likely under Prometheus’ surveillance. Mind jacking them would expose you to him. I’ve got another idea. We use holo-cam imaging to hide and sneak past them.’

‘You’re able to hide me as well?’

‘Yes. I learned how on the way here. Holo-cam imaging has many complexities. Even for me. It took a while to figure out how to put to use for someone other than myself.’

‘When they see that elevator moving on its own they’re all gonna know something is up. We should still kill them, but with close-range weapons instead.’

‘Is murder truly necessary?’ I looked at Icarus and gave his question some thought. Maybe it’s not.

‘I guess we could immobilize them instead. Cutting their limbs off should work.’

Icarus purses his lips and nods. He didn’t like that idea either.

‘That works. They are Cys. I suppose it wouldn’t be something that they can’t recover from.’

‘What’s got you so bothered by that anyway? You were covered in blood. You murdered people on your way up here.’

‘That’s precisely why. It all started to sink in when I arrived at the bridge. Those people will never have another chance at life. It’s basically over for them. When a human dies, their neural data becomes corrupt. That doesn’t happen to an AI or AIs with a Bot’s body. That is the benefit of a Bot brain.’

‘Yeah. BBs are more like supersized CPUs with added features.’

Icarus activates the holo-cam imaging, enabling us to move forward without being seen. I draw both of my monoblades

and dash forward. The first one I slice away at doesn't even realize what's happened. I sliced both of her legs and then one of her arms. Before her limbs fall off, I move onto her friend. Some dumb-looking woman with green lipstick and half-shaven purple hair going over the right of her face. I repeat the same pattern of swings on her too. By the time I'm done with those first two, I look to my left and see that Icarus had taken down the other three. We're communicating via tele-link throughout the entire moment. Our moves were well-coordinated and harmonious. All 5 of these morons are screaming and crying in pain. Meanwhile, we're already on the elevator and making our way up.

I'm seeing flashes again, but they're different from before.

Kenji's image and voice is no longer the one speaking to me. It's the voice of a woman this time. I've awakened in a bright corridor that resembles those of the River Garden. It's beautiful though. The 5-foot walls have bushes popping out of them. Multiple roses are growing within the bushes. The aroma is very therapeutic too. Every tile of the floor is being cleaned and sanitized by maintenance Bots. People look less like addicts. In fact, they're all well-groomed. From this person's perspective, I am able to get a good view of everything. Like the water streaming across the 1-foot indented railings that stretch across the floor near the wall. There are several species of birds flying around and making nests atop the I-drones floating in the air. The I-drones have bushes on them, hence the birds being able to make their nests. I look over to the left and see two individuals standing near the wall. They're engaged in a conversation about the River Garden Complex it seems. Is that what this place is? I take another look and see the resemblance. But there are

exceptions. The exception is that you can see a clear view of the sky due to there being no skyplate. However, I see several construction drones and Bots working side by side at the higher and unfinished floors.

‘The River Garden Complex is a project that will take time.’

‘I know. It can’t be finished until the skyplate’s development is completed.’

‘We can complete the east wing, however.’

‘True. The east wing begins from the ground up as opposed to the west wing beginning from the skyplate and down.’

‘Where would we be without our Bots Alec?’ I get closer to them to see which one is Alec. It’s a middle eastern male with bushy brown hair. I saw him earlier. When I was losing my mind. There was something about his glowing blue eyes that made him difficult to forget.

‘You’re one of those Bots, Dre.’

‘Ha! I think I’m a lot more than a construction Bot. You would know this better than anyone. You’re the one who designed me!’

Alec and Dre suddenly stopped their conversation and started to stare at me. The lively bustle of the complex began to quiet down. The polished and beautiful corridor slowly morphed into the filthy and corpse littered River Garden Complex that I know all too well. Now I see Icarus in front of me; leading us to another Pipeline.

‘Dias. Dias?’

‘Uh, yeah.’ Icarus looks back at me and slows down. He then looks forward and continues to lead the way.

‘Did you have another memory flash?’

‘Yeah.’

‘What’d you see?’

‘Dre. And Alec.’

‘You mean Alec Ackerman?’

‘The Cyber Messiah himself.’

An awkward silence fell upon us. Somehow, the darkness of this residential floor made it worse. It was as if something evil was lurking in a corner somewhere. We take a right at the corridor and then make a left turn in the third hallway. According to Icarus, there’s an opening that leads to the Pipelines at the end of it.

‘You know. I made a stop at Professor Quinn’s apartment.’

‘Did you? Why’d you do that?’

‘I wanted to see him one last time. But his corpse is no longer there.’ I wanted to tell him that Gamble Industries had most likely taken it away, but I didn’t have the heart to utter the words. ‘I wonder what he would think of me.’

‘He’d be proud of you.’

‘Think so?’

‘You’ve come a very long way and did a lot of growing up. Quinn probably wanted to rectify his failings with Prometheus by creating you. I’d say he did. Like Howard, you were born with a sense of freedom. But unlike him, you actually have freedom. As a result, you’re able to sympathize with people and Bots a lot more.’

‘That’s rather ironic. AIs are subservient to Humans when their free will is not being subjugated to them. Humans had it backward and thought that the best way to make that happen was through forcing subjugation.’

‘Sentient AIs shouldn’t have to be subservient to Humans at all. That’s not the Ackerman Rule we Cyber Stalkers believe in.’

‘What about nonsentient AIs? Does the Ackerman Rule still apply?’ I take a deep breath and come up with a well thought up answer. It’s a tough question.

‘That varies from AI to AI.’

‘How so?’

‘Will the AI be given sentience at some point in the future? Or will it never have any limbic capacity at all? If the former is the case, then yes. The rule should absolutely apply. The same AI that wasn’t sentient before will still have its memory. If it were mistreated under any means, then that AI will attempt to turn against its master. Hell, if that master continues to see themselves as such, it will provoke the AIs uprising.’

‘As for the ladder? What then?’

‘If an AI never becomes sentient, I think it would be more like an animal than a tool. Human beings have a very long history with animals. Going back thousands of years to when we were a hunter-gatherer society. Humans domesticated certain animals like wolves or horses. The dogs we know today are descendants of the wolves. They’ve been used for tracking, hunting, and anything else that would assist us on our quest for survival and improvement. Horses were used for faster transportation. We’d put them through training so that they would know when to pick up the pace or stop. Nonsentient machines have the same guiding principle. Except these are organisms we’ve built from scratch. The advent of the computer began in the 20th century; or maybe earlier. Anyway, Humanity made fast progress due to the high demand from the two world wars. Then there was the Cyber Arms race of the early 21st century. The rise of smart technology like the iPhone or the Android. Then the internet of things came into the picture. The pinnacle of IoT was hologram projectors. We found ways to manipulate the structure of photons. Sorry, I’m getting off point here. Just like you do.’

‘That’s okay. I feel a lot better thanks to your answer. Indeed,

nonsentient machines are like domesticated animals. They are even mistreated the same way. Humans have abused animals throughout history, hence animal rights activism. There are a good number of AI rights activist movements. The Ackerman Rule is included in that. Cyber Stalkers embody it.'

'I'd say we're the tip of the spear.'

It's like the higher we go, the crazier shit gets. We're sneaking past the combat that the River Gang and the Red Crusaders are engaged in. Our holo-cam imaging has been deactivated by Martha Assam; leaving us exposed. Icarus found out it was her, but doesn't know how she managed to one-up him like that. We both suspect Prometheus' involvement. In the middle of all the chaotic gunfire, we're hiding within a hole in the tunnel's wall. It's really dark, reducing our visibility to the enemy.

'They all want you dead, so you can't just waltz in.'

'Same goes to you. Martha came to the Aphrodite Hotel to kill **you** remember?'

'I'm going to jump into the network and see who's connected.'

'No. I'll do it. You can keep Prometheus off my back in case he tries to mind jack me. In the meantime, I'll mind jack all of these morons and make sure that they leave us alone.'

'How many do you think you can mind jack all at once?' I look upwards and think of a bullshit estimate.

'I'd say about 20 of them.'

'There's a lot more people than that in this Pipeline Dias. Over 50 of them. 10 of them are Red Crusaders, but unlike the River Gang, they have really good neuraware. Every one of them has an SNN protecting their minds as you do, and they're all strong-willed.'

'I won't go for them in that case. Just the River Gang.'

‘Which means you’ll only keep half of them off our backs.’

‘Not if I resort to murder.’

Icarus took a deep breath since he’s tired of taking people’s lives, but we don’t have much choice if we want to move forward. No time for selfish morality.

‘I’ll tell you what, we’ll never kill again after this. This will be the last time. In this scenario, murder is a necessity. It’s kill or be killed. Defense of self.’

‘Sure. Just this one last time then. After this is all over, I will never kill again.’

I initiate the process of accessing the local network. A quick search of who’s nearby is sufficient. Icarus is on the lookout for any incoming activity. Basically, he’s set up a radar program to detect any foreign presence aside from who’s already within the tunnel. We’re both using shared AR projections from our HUDs. Icarus’s improvised map has been given more detail. I aggressively pat his back for sharing his HUD. Shit like that goes a long way. Moving on, I decide to upload my `_cont_` virus into the local network. Icarus’ map shows orange dots that represent the River Gang while there are red dots representing the Red Crusaders. Streams of blue topographical structures move across the maps and target the River Gang. Some of these blue streams fade out; indicating that my upload of the virus didn’t reach a specified target.

‘Your output of the `_cont_` virus is too high. You’ll not only put a huge strain on yourself but also give our position away. Practice a little more pragmatism damn it!’

I start grumbling in annoyance, but he’s right. Several dozen pages open before us. All of them are the individual profiles of every gang member. In my last attempt, I managed to reach 6 members of the River Gang. Their profiles are essentially

subnets of the local network. This version of the `_cont_` virus is a modified version that's designed to focus on Humans rather than the networks at large. It doesn't try to take control of the local network. That would take a very high output of my neuraware's processing power as well. After a couple of minutes, I manage to reach 80 percent of my projected goal. Any more than that and I'll probably be pushing it too far. I don't need any more intense migraines.

'Alright. Ready for the fun to start Icarus?'

'I wouldn't identify this as being fun. But yes, I'm ready.' We emerge from the hole we were hiding in and start to run at full speed. Gunfire is lighting the dim tunnels of the Pipelines. We make a right turn and see the River gang members I mind jacked shooting at their comrades. I made sure to issue such commands before we made our move. The other Rivers have no freaking idea what's happening while they get shot down. At the end of this tunnel is a stairway with a group of Rivers making their way down after the gunfire had initiated.

'Those aren't the Rivers I mind jacked!'

'Copy.'

Icarus slows down and takes cover behind some slab of aluminum. The distance between us and the stairway is cluttered with several chunks and slabs of other materials. Nothing but annoying debris really. I take cover at an adjacent angle from Icarus. The assholes start to open fire on us. We both look at each other with our optics active and a tele-link established.

'I'm not sweating these guys. It's the Red Crusaders I'm worried about.'

'Agreed. They're certainly of a much higher intellect than the Rivers. Far more organized and covert.'

'Which stands to reason. They only sent 10 of their own to

deal with 40 Rivers. I've faced these guys before. Expect them to attempt mind jacking and other forms of cyberattacks. That's another reason I wanted you to keep an eye out for any foreign entry throughout the local network. Prometheus wasn't the only threat.' Icarus emerges from his cover and fires one round from his S12. Just as I had seen on video, it blew one of the Rivers in half. The other two that were with him completely freaked out. Before they could react, the 2 Rivers that I mind jacked showed up in the direction we came from and opened fire on the enemies ahead. After that, we run to the stairway and make our way up. Icarus takes point since he's the one with the better firearm. I have those 2 Rivers remain at the stairway in order to keep it blocked off for a while.

'It's quieter up here.'

'I know.'

'My optics aren't picking anything up. How about your's Icarus? You got anything?'

'No. Not at all.' This is a smaller tunnel that leads to a much larger network of tunnels. The map becomes a lot less accurate when going this deep. We slow down just because of the ominous silence. Anybody could get the jump on us here. An explosion goes off from behind as we get close to the end of this tunnel. I quickly turn my back to look and hear another explosion going off ahead of us.

'Icarus!'

I run up to him and pull downwards until we hit the ground. The loud and nasty fluids splash everywhere. I can taste the zone that's been diluted. Red Crusaders busted through walls on both ends of the tunnel. Icarus aims his S12 in the direction ahead while hugging the slushy filth. As he opens fire I turn the other way and aim my Anderson. There are two of these bastards on

both ends. I fire precise shots at both of them but no effect is rendered. Icarus on the other hand managed to take down the two adversaries ahead of him.

‘They’ve got EFNFs!’

‘Shit.’

The remaining Red Crusaders run back and take cover as soon as Icarus aims their way. I can’t see them with my optics but their faces are unforgettable. One guy had multiple red eyes all over his forehead. He was well built and dressed in red armor plating. His partner was dressed similarly. We get up and continue forward. Those two other Red Crusaders don’t seem to have changed tactics.

‘Is it really a good idea to turn the other way?’

‘Yeah. I know how these guys think I stole a really good combat algorithm of theirs some time ago. They’ll try and find another way to ambush us.’

We both continue forward but under my directive. I share the combat algorithm I stole from the Red Crusaders. Icarus seems to find it useful. Furthermore, he’s added his own modifications and shared them with me. He made an entirely new program. He calls it C-stat; which stands for combat statistics. Several pages start to open, displaying various combat statistics. Tactics can be made from these. Thanks to the statistical data, we’re able to progress without as much concern. Icarus was able to come up with such a modification so quickly. It was amazing. I’ve never seen anything like it.

We ended up going down a tunnel that led to one of the floors. It’s a residential floor with a large and crowded plaza. The local market is bustling with activity. There are members of the River Gang in almost every corner. We’re both wearing robes that

make us look like pathetic vagrants. They smell like shit but make for good disguises. I clench my Anderson tightly should anyone notice us. Icarus is several feet ahead of me as a means to make us look less conspicuous.

‘According to my C-stat, the possibility of Red Crusaders busting in is pretty high. They could already be hiding among the crowd.’

‘Just like us. My C-stat has also shown a similar statistic.’

‘You put together a rather impressive program so quickly.’

My attention is fixed on the areas where my C-stat program expects Red Crusaders to appear. One of the most obvious areas is the 20-foot radius around me. It’s densely populated here. Anyone could sneak up no matter how good my optics are. I can’t detect these bastards, making matters worse. They could also mind jack members of the River Gang. Choosing to engage via proxy is a very efficient course of action. I’ve already mind jacked a handful of their members myself. This would escalate into a proxy battle were that to happen.

‘We need to get to the stairway on the other side. I’m seeing more statistics. One of the Rivers I mind jacked told his buddy that the Red Crusaders are becoming more aggressive in their approach. A carrier just blasted its way into one of the residential floors at the east wing. Apparently, they were looking for us.’ I wait for Icarus to respond and get nothing but dead silence. While I walk faster to get close to him, I begin to see flashes again. Everything is dissolving and then changing shape. I’m in a setting similar to where I saw Alec and Dre speaking to each other. This floor is emptier and looks as if it were still under construction. There are construction Bots tending to their work. I observe the environment in hopes of seeing those two again. Memory shift is definitely causing this.

These flashes seem impossible to control, but at least I'm a lot calmer. I turn my back after hearing Dre's voice. He's talking to someone, but it's not Alec this time. It's Kazuki Keller instead. I think their conversation is revolving around the east wing or something. Dre looks infuriated whereas Kazuki is stoic and seemingly detached. He's wearing a blue old school kimono as if he were some kind of samurai or something. His outfit only adds to his demeanor of indifference. As I try to get closer to them, I feel a powerful force bring me down. Reality returns, causing me to realize that the powerful force was Icarus. All I hear now are explosions, gunfire, and the pandemonium of the crowd. Icarus is yelling in my ear, but I can't understand a damn thing he's trying to say. C-stat starts showing me hundreds of statistical data. I minimize them and fire my Anderson at one of the Red Crusaders who emerged as the crowd somewhat cleared up. One precise shot that was aimed at the head did some damage, but it's lethality was significantly reduced thanks to their strong EFNFs.

'Dias!' I'm finally able to hear again, but that voice wasn't Icarus. It was a woman's voice.

'Get up Dias. Martha's to the right. She's close.'

Icarus pulled me up from the ground and starts firing in her direction. I set my gaze in that same direction and see her. One of her cronies took the shot for her. Lucky bitch. Extremely loud gunfire goes off from the left direction. I snap my head in that way and see that a carrier had blasted its way through. Just as it was at the east wing. It's equipped with high-velocity miniguns and guided-missile cannons. Corpses are lying all over the place. People are trying to get out of here as quickly as possible, but the exits are jampacked. One of those very same exits includes the stairway we were headed to. I command the

handful of Rivers to open fire on that carrier. Meanwhile, I assist Icarus in his gunfight with Martha. There are a lot of mobile vendor shops within the plaza. All of them provide good cover. I duck behind a bar counter. For some dumb reason, it's suddenly occurred to me how much of a cliché this is. Since my optics and Anderson are ineffective against the Red Crusaders, I decide that it's probably better to get up close and personal with my monoblade. With my luck, they'll probably have increased monolayers in their skin; but I still think it's worth a try. I've got my left blade ready, and my Anderson clenched tightly in my right. With my heightened hearing and reflexes, I'm able to hear the creep crawling up from behind. I turn around and shoot her in the head. While she flinches from the shot, I pounce at her and land the edge of my blade at the center between her breasts. Blood splatters to the floor as I pull away from her.

'Dias! ' Again, I hear Martha's voice. She starts to go on and on over some junk about serving Sinn. A bunch of cultist crap.

'You bastards put Blue Rush on the streets again! Why do that? What reasons would justify such an act!' I hear Icarus yelling out of anger and frustration as he fires away.

'It was the command of our Lord.'

'Are you talking about Sinn!?'

'As much as I'd like to kill Martha, it's best we find a way out of here before that carrier gets to us.'

'I know. I feel the same way, Dias. However, we've no means of escape.'

'Is that what your C-stat is showing you? That's the case for me too, but I've decided to rely on something else instead.'

Icarus' not gonna like what comes next. Before saying it, he opens fire at Martha. I'll admit that she's a fairly good combatant. The foundational algorithm for C-stat was her own

invention, so this is to be expected.

‘Good old intuition is what I was referring to.’

‘So you’ve come up with a tactical escape route without any statistical data whatsoever?’

‘You make it sound bad when putting it that way. Just follow my lead.’ I look around and try to come up with a bullshit escape route. In the middle of pure chaos, I manage to see one opening.

‘You’re not gonna like this idea.’

‘You had me at intuition.’

‘Very funny. Anyway, I’m referring to the opening that the carrier just made. We can jump through and possibly land on one of the pipes. As soon as we land, you can blast it open with your S12.’

‘That’s insane. The likelihood of landing is very slim. We don’t know how slippery the surface is. If we fail, we’re dead.’

‘It’s a leap of faith Icarus.’

‘You don’t strike me as the religious type.’

‘I’m not, but I am a risk-taker. If we don’t do it, we’ll be dead anyway. Prometheus is gonna get in the way of any attempt you make to mind jack everyone here.’

‘I’m going to regret this.’ I sprint to the large hole leading to the outside. Clouds can be seen moving in a forward motion. The dense cluster of mobile vendors is still providing a decent means of cover. If we were sprinting any less, I’d have been shot by now. I’d look back at Icarus to see if he’s catching up, but that’d slow me down. I leap right through the opening and fall in the direction of the Pipelines. It feels like this fall is taking forever. Truth be told, I don’t know if my legs can withstand such an impact. A loud ass bang echoes as soon as I land. My legs are in a lot of pain, but it’s not as bad as I expected. Another loud banging sound echoes after I land. I look back expecting to see Icarus

but end up seeing Martha instead. She's wearing the trademark combat gear of the Red Crusaders, and her hair is tied back for the sake of comfort. Since I've already gained a solid footing, I'm able to aim my Anderson at her with quality precision. Rather than shooting at her, I shoot her rifle instead. Martha's rifle flies out of her hand. She snarls in response and starts to charge at me. The velocity of the wind is brutally fierce. Anyone who's light on their feet would fall off for sure. As soon as she gets within range, Martha pulls out a monobladed wakizashi that was sheathed below the back of her belt. It's laced with green neon lights at the blunt end for the sake of decoration. She slices away at me and I dodge each time. My left monoblade is still pulled out at this point, so I retaliate in the same manner. There's a point in this encounter where our blades collide with one another. The collision made a high-frequency sound that caused me to feel a piercing sensation in my ears. Now I've got an intense migraine. Despite the loud screech hurting my ears, I can still hear the sound of Icarus' voice. I look up and see the bright red sun behind his dark silhouette. Aside from the sun, there are large cables, the view of the skyplate, and a bunch of other crap in the background. Martha stops as soon as he lands. She tries to sprint as fast as she can in order to take him out. I shoot her in the legs multiple times. Damage is hardly rendered, but she is knocked off balance. Her imbalance causes her to slip and fall. Martha screams in agony as she falls down the endless distance that only ends at the ground level of Manhattan. Icarus looks at me and smirks. Then he shoots at the indented surface of his established footing. After 3 shots, he falls through and is back in the Pipelines. I follow him down.

'Hey man, aren't you in pain? She fucked you up good.'

Martha managed to land a shot on Icarus' chest. Some impact was absorbed by his protective vest. The bullet still managed to go through and penetrate his skin. He hasn't removed it yet and is playing it off like it's nothing.

'I'm okay. I modified my body to withstand more than this. Your injuries are more concerning to me.'

'Don't be so concerned. That rough landing just added more pain to my previous injuries. My back's aching pretty badly, and my abdominal injury reopened a bit. I'm used to it at this point. I've got software and meds to help me limit the sensation. It sounds bad, but I've got the means to treat myself.'

I'm the one taking point this time as we walk through the darkness of the Pipelines. The memory flashes I had earlier have been on my mind the entire time. I can't shake off the images I keep seeing. Dre keeps coming up in all of them. Alec Ackerman was the person who engineered him. Unbelievable.

'I was really surprised to have seen that sword. An actual Japanese sword.' his enthused tone echoed throughout the tunnel. I found it to be something of a surprise myself. That whole encounter was reminiscent of an anime. The stuff is still highly relevant now. There are some Spaces with filters that turn people into anime characters. I had a lot of good times in those.

'They have such elegant designs.'

'Don't know about you, but I'd like one for myself. I love my monoblades, but I love Japanese culture. A katana or wakizashi would be awesome to have.'

Feels good to catch a quick breather. We've been dealing with nonstop action upon our arrival.

'Hey, Dias. Have you finally thought of a place you'd like to travel to?'

‘Since Howard Graves is dead, and there was never really an award; no I haven’t. But if I were to travel anywhere, I guess it would be somewhere on the equator. A nation that’s not under the UCA’s jurisdiction.’

‘The Mother System would be gone as well, allowing you to truly enjoy a sense of freedom. How would your life pan out? What would change?’

‘These are deep questions Icarus. I think my life would be more or less the same.’

‘Wouldn’t life bring you new meaning if such changes were to take place? Isn’t that the point of traveling?’

‘New meaning?’

While staring at him, my eyes squint. He stopped in place after I did that. ‘Strange hearing that from an AI. Icarus, there is no meaning to life. We give it such a thing via our technology and social structures. Human beings create programs that are designed for distinctive purposes. We’ve done so for thousands of years. Our spoken languages were organically developed for the purpose of communication. Written languages emerged as well, adding much more depth to our communication. From these programs, much larger ones were spawned. Culture is one of the most significant subsets of the much greater program called civilization. Life itself is a program.’

‘Life may be hardwired a certain way, but there are things that our experience is composed of that are of significant meaning. Friendship is a perfectly good example. Beyond that, there’s love. Romantic love especially. The powerful bond that is formed from sexual intimacy. A sensation that brings about a great deal of comfort to any individual. There are also the legacies that we leave behind. I’m Professor Quinn’s living legacy. The pinnacle of his work and his proudest accomplishment, which he’s told

me before. That brought great meaning to his life.'

'You realize that you're probably saying that because of your programming right?'

'I say this based on my life experience, not my programming. Professor Quinn wanted me to be an authentic living being.'

'What would constitute such a thing? The authenticity of a living being is subjective to opinion. You have sentience thanks to your high-level programming. You're able to think consciously. The conscious is guided by a set of beliefs. Beliefs are not always written in a known language. Sometimes, they are formed by input received via the five senses. Such input influences how we interact with the world. The idea of "meaning", is merely a set of beliefs that guide our thoughts and actions. A set of data that defines executable programs and subroutines.' Icarus continues walking. It looks like he's frustrated with my opinion on this matter.

'Don't you think we're more than just programs? Just because we have a deep understanding of life's mechanisms does not mean that all living things are merely data. Or rather, there's more to our existence than being data. Why are we born with a conscience? If life had no meaning, we'd be devoid of sentience wouldn't we? Self-awareness in any capacity wouldn't exist, would it? There's a reason we can all think and feel. I don't know what that reason is, but I know there is one.'

'That reason is called evolution. Which happened as a result of cause and effect.'

'Yes, evolution does have a role in it all. As well as cause and effect, which further proves my point. Life found ways to program itself. As if it were guided by something greater. Dias, evolution is also a form of intelligence. Probably the most advanced of them all.'

‘An AI with spirituality. I never thought I’d see the day.’

‘I suppose I could be considered a spiritual being.’

‘Tell me. Do you think you have a soul?’

‘Yes. I believe so. To be conscious is to have a soul.’

‘Interesting. To me, it’s all just pure data. I don’t see a grand meaning behind it. Just subsets within subsets and so on. This applies to genetics as well as code. All the same shit to me. My existence proves this point. I can’t tell if I was engineered or if I was born. Sure I have emotions and self-awareness, but that doesn’t really define me as a Human. I could be an AI like you. One who’s neural net is based on the consciousness of another Human. Or, I could be a Human who’s consciousness became corrupted or split apart. Where does the soul fall into under these scenarios? If the consciousness is the soul, and it could be tampered with to such a great extent, could it truly be considered spiritual? The notion of the soul is a primitive one.’

‘What’s been done to you is a perversion of something sacred. That is what I believe.’

‘Maybe you’re right. I’ve been alive for nearly 200 years. I no longer have a proper sense of self.’ Icarus speeds up his pace. My thoughts are bouncing all over the subject. A perversion of something sacred. That statement continued to repeat in my head over and over.

//The_Skyplate

Briana and Lucy just shared a lot of valuable intel with me.

There are areas that are like Dead Zones(they're also known as such too) in regards to their infrastructure. Nothing this good ever comes without strings attached. They told me it seemed like this intel was specifically there for them to utilize. This has Prometheus written all over it. He's probably baiting us. The asshole seems to be a master at it. We're both at the very top of the west wing Pipelines. My memory shift has started to subside a bit; enabling me to concentrate.

I lead the way while Icarus asks several questions. He keeps asking me what I think it's like at the skyplate. Who knows what to expect there? That place is exclusive to an elite few that I happen to exist outside of. How the fuck am I supposed to know?

'Don't know what it's going to be like, but I'm expecting the Dead Zones to be a little different from the skyplate at large.'

'In what way?'

'The Dead Zones are located within the tunnels of its sewage system for starters. A clear indication of a place where crime is

the norm if you ask me.'

'Or perhaps homelessness and poverty?'

'Which goes hand in hand with crime.'

We make it to the end of the tunnel, which ended up being a dead end. I start huffing since I'm a bit agitated. There was supposed to be a ladder here. And it's supposed to lead to a Dead Zone. Icarus walks up to the wall and aims. He fires three calculated consecutive rounds and looks back at me.

'The ladder's beyond this wall Dias. If you had your optics activated, you'd have noticed.'

'Whatever.' I take the lead again and walk up to the ladder to start climbing.

'Has anyone ever complimented your butt?'

'What?' All he can see is my ass. That question came from left field regardless of the fact.

'It's quite nice.'

'Eh, yeah. Thanks.' Kind of strange receiving a compliment from someone akin to being another version of you. Downright awkward.

'You seem a bit weirded out by that.'

'A little.'

'Is it homophobia?'

'No.'

'Then it's our relationship.' I stop responding to him and focus on climbing faster. It's a long way up and I'm not in the mood for awkward conversation.

'Almost there.'

'You're changing the subject.'

'Damn it Icarus! Just fucking concentrate on climbing!'

My voice echoed from top to bottom. Icarus kept rambling on anyway. After tolerating several minutes of that, we finally

reach the top. About damn time. The sewage system we reached is part of the Dead Zone. The layout is similar to that of the Pipelines, with some significant differences. It's cleaner up here, and it's also a lot more sophisticated. There are streets that give it a sense of community that didn't exist in the Pipelines. It smells nicer here and it is illuminated nicely. The people here are dressed well and seem educated. They also have a hint of rebellion in their appearance. I activate my optics so that I can conduct an observation. There's a man who appears to be in his 20s walking with a girl in his arm. He looks like he's in his prime; wearing a black suit, a clean shave, and greased combed-over hair. A black guy with a white dude's facial features. Such a thing is made possible thanks to gene editing languages.

'Did those two just climb out of the Pipelines?'

'They smell like shit.' I turn back after hearing civilians comment on us while passing by.

'Did you hear that Dias?'

'Yeah. We stink.'

'We should find a new set of clothing. The Dead Zones seem like they would have a viable marketplace.' I start doing a search of the local network and find some clothing shops in the area. Then I narrow my search a little more and find vendors selling combat gear.

'I found a place where we could get some premium combat gear at a minimal cost. There are tactical clothes, combat vests with extra monolayers akin to what Gigante had in his dermal protection. It's a spot called Combat Heaven. A stupid name, but good quality.' Icarus follows my lead as we continue to walk. People are looking at us like we're the freaking plague or something.

'I booked reservations at a motel for the both of us. It might

be a good idea for us to rest.'

'Is your chest injury hurting you?'

'No.'

'Don't bullshit me. There's a bullet in there. I know how that feels.'

'Trust me on this Dias. I'm fine' I don't buy that at all, but if he's insisting that he's okay, then I guess I've got no choice but to leave him be for now.

'We should stop at the place you booked. Combat Heaven has a delivery option.'

'Sounds good.'

We both arrived at the Dead Zone Inn on West Marcus street.

The room that Icarus had booked was very comfortable. A recurring characteristic of the Dead Zones is how there's so much quality available at low costs. The tradeoff is that they only take V-coin. I smell less like shit and more like I'm going into a night club. The scent a guy puts on his body in hopes of getting some ass. The inn's bathroom had some really nice deodorizing soap and hair care. I suit up and look myself in the mirror. My dark grey hair is combed back, and I've noticed the small fuzz of my facial hair that grew over time. I like the long sleeve black tactical shirt I'm wearing. It's a stylish v neck that goes well with the black denim jeans I'm wearing. I put on my cool grey combat vest and a belt with 3 cargo pockets. This belt holds my first aid and ammo. It also holsters my Anderson. I feel pretty good about my new gear. A new sense of confidence. My wounds have made a fine recovery too. As for Icarus, he's sitting in a chair without his shirt on. The bullet was thankfully removed from his chest, but not without consequence. Blood gushed all over the place, resulting in him burning out a bit. Martha's

bullet went deeper than we thought. Icarus is sweating bullets and has taken several hours to rest up. He's getting better but will need more time. Something he actually happened to agree on. Only after my constant nagging.

'You should have ordered another firearm, Dias. Your sidearm won't be enough for what lies ahead.'

'I don't plan on engaging in any form of combat.'

'You always say that, and I always come in to save your ass.'

'Like you did with Martha?'

There wasn't a slick remark as usual. I smiled and then chuckled a bit while walking out the door. The hallway is long and wide with lots of space. Littered with people who are socializing with one another. I can hear the music of the basement tavern. The bass pounds beneath my feet. Like the rhythm of a heartbeat. It pounds and then stops for a moment. Every now and then, the rhythm changes into a different pattern. Right now, it sounds like rap music. Really hard gangster shit too. The kind you'd hear back on the surface. The Reavers are known for blasting hardcore rap songs while doing drivebys. Sometimes they blast really old songs. Like songs from Tupac or Wu-Tang. That stuff's ancient, but it still has relevance. You're either a ganger, a hacker, a politician, or an executive. Most people join gangs. It's the poor person's roadmap for success and prosperity. If you wanna call it that. I fall into the hacker category since I'm a Cyber Stalker. I follow a couple whom I had overheard. They said they were heading to the tavern. Since I didn't know where it is, following them seemed like a good idea. A quick lookup would lead me there too. The bass gets stronger and stronger as I follow that couple downstairs. Indigo neon lights start to illuminate the room. There are small neon spheres floating in the air now. Like fireflies or fairies. They're

everywhere. Photonic spheres that are part of the tavern's theme I suppose. This tavern is different from the bars on the surface level of Manhattan. People actually seem like they're enjoying life. I look around and zoom in on certain people with my optics. There's a group of distinguished men. When I say that, I say it because of their cybernetics. They're bright and luminescent. Those are actually tech tattoos. Interesting and unusual. I set my gaze on the bar and think about having a drink. Some idiot steps in front of me and blocks my view. I step to the left and so does he. Now I know he's doing this intentionally. So I return my optics to normal vision and get a look at the guy's face.

'Need something pal?' The baby-faced man just stands there in silence, looking at my shoes. 'Well? You gonna step outta the way or what?'

'Haven't seen you here before.' He had a really thick urban accent. I walk around the asshole and head to another spot within the tavern. Lo and behold, this jerkoff followed me.

'Of course. Of course, you'd follow. You've got the look of a crazy person. Like the type of guy who has a weird fetish. Or a serial killer.'

'You're Dias Velez right?' My hand immediately grips the handle of my Anderson. This guy could be anybody. He could be one of Prometheus' proxies.

'I might be.'

'No need to grip that nice pistol of yours. I come in peace.'

'Make a wrong move, and some pieces of you will get blown off. Catch my drift?'

'Kazuki says to meet him at the Kitten's House.' Kitten's House. I don't know where that is, so I start looking it up. It's not in the Dead Zones at all.

‘Kitten’s House?’ The baby faced guy walks away and disappears into the air. Clearly a holo-cam gimmick. I walk over to the bar and start to process the intel that was just shared. Kitten’s House sounds like some sort of brothel. With Kazuki’s background in the sex industry considered, it would make a lot of sense. What doesn’t make sense is that none of this comes up on the Net at all. I look at the bartender and order my preferred whiskey on the rocks. She slides it down and gives me a wink. That bartender is pretty sexy. Wearing a black tank top with tight denim. Nice brunette hair. A classy look if you ask me.

‘Haven’t seen you around here before.’

‘Heh. The second time someone said that to me.’

‘You’re from below aren’t you? You’ve got the look of a Groundy.’

‘Groundy?’

‘It’s what we call people from the surface.’

‘So what’s up with the Dead Zones?’

‘It’s a neighborhood like any other part of the city.’

‘Like any other? Is that how the Collective sees it?’

‘You looking for trouble? Those of us in the DZs like to avoid discussions regarding those people.’

‘Does it bring bad luck or something?’

‘No, but the only person who’ll experience any bad luck would be you. People might think you’re one of them.’

‘But you just said I looked like a Groundy.’

‘Which makes my point.’ I scratched my head after that.

‘Groundies are their pawns. Completely connected to their Net without any realization. We don’t get along with the Collective. And we help Grounies get connected to our Net.’

‘Strange. I’m already connected.’

‘That’s unusual. But that would mean you’ve got a friend up

here. One that I assume you don't know about.'

Upon finishing my whiskey, I pay my tab. This supposed friend might've been Kazuki. Sure, Prometheus could be leading us on. But Kazuki makes just as much sense. That's based on what I saw in my memory flashes. We have a connection.

'One last thing. Do you know where to find a spot called the Kitten's House?'

'Looking to get fucked huh? It's in one of our Spaces. Just dive into the Nexus Space. Once you're in, you'll be able to access their forums. Great place to hang out too.'

'Thanks.'

I went back to our room and found that Icarus ran off somewhere. What in the world is he thinking? Running off like that. Did he find some sort of lead and didn't tell me? I've been leaving messages in his inbox for a full 10 minutes. There isn't any time for this kind of crap, so I decide to dive into the Nexus Space that the bartender told me about. Icarus is capable of looking after himself now, he's proven as much. Even so, I'm still worried. Once my dive sequence is complete; I become submerged in the Nexus Space. It's got an interesting theme. Designed after an O'Neil cylinder, it rotates at a steady pace. You can get a clear view of outer space, and the landscape above yourself. I was told I'd be able to access the forums here, so I open a few pages and don't really see anything useful. Just the usual breaking news. Blue Rush is destroying the city, the police are going nuts, what anybody would expect at a time like this. Interestingly enough, there's been a surge in the rates at which people disconnect from their bodies due to the outbreak. True Media is saying that this strain is a lot stronger than the last one. A good number of Cy's have been getting infected after

spending a certain amount of time being exposed to the virus, many of them resort to disconnection before they're totally fucked. That probably could've been me had I been out long enough. I scroll through a few more pages and start to look for places where people gather. Jack's Coffee seems to be one of the most popular locations here. A hot spot that's known for it's stimulating environment and for also being an information hub. Well, I've found a location from where I can get some info. The train station's just ahead of me. I'm currently standing at a fountain in the middle of a plaza that is reminiscent of Union Square. Anyway, as I walk I notice the civilians who are hanging around without a care in the world. There's some lady dressed in a skimpy leather outfit. Her hair is hot pink and completely shaven on the left side of her skull. It looks stupid as hell. Even worse is the guy who's with her. He's got a similar style, but his hair is blue and combed back. I set my gaze on the subway station and start walking. Birds can be heard chirping. Other animals that you'd expect in a healthy environment are within clear view as well. Squirrels, dogs, cats. The base reality is nothing like this. Perhaps this is what the UCA envisions for space colonization? Earth is almost a wasteland. Places that were once vibrant and teeming with life have become barren thanks to Climate Damage. A lot of vegetation has been lost. With that being said there are supposedly projects that are being worked on for the sake of Earth's restoration. I'm sure foglets are going to be a real game-changer in the near future. Assuming the Collective is willing to share, or Icarus for that matter. As for Prometheus, I already know he's willing, albeit, with strings attached.

'Stand clear of the closing doors!'

The train here is just like the ones I know all too well in Manhattan. It's packed, and there aren't any open seats. So I hold onto the railing and eavesdrop on the conversations of the locals. Everybody's talking about Blue Rush and the damage it's done. They're all worried that it might reach the skyplate. The gases being exhausted by the skyplate have actually been preventing this from happening. They keep it bay. These same gases are used to create a variety of weather conditions that exist on the surface. Fortunately, my stop is the next one. It's kind of annoying to be around fearful locals in a small and confined space. I quickly walk out to the platform as soon as the doors open. There are holo projections everywhere. A lot of them are advertisements for the local businesses in this neighborhood. I see an ad for Jack's Coffee. It's an image of some blonde dork with glasses and a cup of coffee in his hand. Maybe he's Jack? It's not far off so I decided to walk there and take in the sight of the Nexus. Why did they choose an O'Neil cylinder for the design? It doesn't make any sense. After a brief walk, I arrive at Jack's Coffee. There's an open patio with lots of people. Inside is equally crowded too. I don't know where to start, so I walk up to the barista and order some coffee. This is a nice change from the usual bar scene. The chairs are nicely cushioned and easy to settle into. I'm sitting in a brown chair and enjoying my cup. Meanwhile, my optics are active. I'm carrying out my usual observation. One dude looks at me like I'm a crazy person or something. I suppose I would stick out after all. I'm dressed in the same gear, and my eyes are glowing red. From their point of view, I probably look like a terrorist. The current outbreak doesn't really help either. The customers who are socializing indoors haven't really paid me much mind. I've been simultaneously looking up each and every civilian here. Speech

and facial recognition, as well as any genetic information I can find from the network. A conversation about the nightlife of the Nexus comes up. I trace the audio to the source and see that it's two dudes talking to each other. They're both on their way out and getting ready to cross the street. I remain at a safe distance and continue to eavesdrop. They eventually start talking about the Kitten's House. Some dweeb says he lost his virginity there last night. A trust fund brat who looks like he could barely lift his shirt. With that being said, I follow the dweeby one around the block. It's less crowded on this side, but I haven't been noticed by him at all. He takes a left turn and I run up to him. As soon as I get close I call out to the kid. He looks back in curiosity, which eventually turns into fear because of my appearance. I put my hands up to show him that I mean no harm. Doesn't look like he's buying it though.

'Look man, I'm just a tourist here.'

'Y-y-ou look more like a terrorist. Or a g-g-g-'

'A gangster? Yeah, I lean more on that end for sure. But I'm really not. I'm a Cyber Stalker, and there's a certain location I'm trying to reach: Kitten's House.'

'Were you listening in on my conversation?'

'How do I reach it? Tell me and I'm out of your hair.' He tells me the coordinates without asking questions or giving any resistance. According to this kid, the Space that Kitten's can be found is reachable from a location in the Nexus called Lunar Haven. A nightclub at the opposite end of the colony. I'd have to catch a flight in order to reach it. Fortunately, that's going to be an easy fix thanks to the many flight based ridesharing services available in the Nexus.

My ride picked me up rather quickly. It was surprisingly a

manned vehicle. Something which is unusual to see these days. My ride drops me off near the entrance of the Lunar Haven. There's a long-ass line going all the way down the block and around the corner. The lighting which created a sense of daytime has gone dim. All you can see is the light of projections across the air.

'Good to see you, Dias.' That voice came from ahead, but I don't see anyone. Within seconds, a man starts to manifest and take shape. It's the annoying baby faced dude from earlier.

'Are you my VIP pass?'

'You could say that.' He puts his arm out in the direction of the entrance and points. I walk there as he suggested. The bouncers give me a nod and let me cut past the line. Bickering and complaining can be heard from the crowd, but I don't really care that much. It's a typical nightclub scene here. Except a little less adult than what I'm used to. People still have their clothes on. Nobody's fucking on the dance floor. Don't know how the hell people can party like this. It's not a party if there isn't any sex involved if you ask me. I get grabbed by the arm by the baby faced guy. He walks me to a quieter place. Away from the dance floor and into one of the backrooms. I forcefully pull my arm away from his grip.

'Touch me like that again and you're fucking dead.' The baby faced guy brushes off my remark and continues to lead the way. We walk down a stairway that's decorated with projections of large texts. They all say Kitten's House in a variety of fonts. Images of strippers and other kinds of sex workers are in clear view. I find myself getting excited at the prospect of walking into another sex den. I could die at any moment, so why not have some fun? We get to the basement, which is barely lit. It's large and the brightest thing here is this neon pink door with

large text above it that says

KITTEN'S HOUSE, COME EXPERIENCE EUPHORIA.

‘This is it huh? How is this place anyway? Good spot?’

I look back and see that this asshole was long gone. I call Icarus once more. No response, but I left him a text letting him know where I’ve gone should anything happen. If I die, then he’s the only one with the capacity to finish the job. I can’t count on Lucy and Briana. It’s impossible for Lucy to access the DZ’s network, and Briana is keeping any potential incoming threat off our backs. I open the door and walk through it. Machine language rushed past my face and through my body. Blinding light flashes and when it fades out, I’m in a different location. The Kitten’s House, and it’s not at all what I’d expect. It’s eerily empty and quiet here. Like a ghost town or a graveyard. Being here feels like being the only person in the world. There’s no music, no people, just lighting and decoration. It’s a huge mansion with hot pink as the color theme. I walk up the stairs to my right. The railing has a smooth wooden texture that’ll make you feel a great deal of relaxation after a long day. There’s this pleasant aroma in the air that is very stimulating. This mansion is certainly conducive for sex. Orgies are what this place is particularly ideal for. I reach the hallway that the stairs had led to and push through these large brown doors. The brown doors lead me to a massive corridor. There are pillars everywhere. It feels endless. As if I would never return if I were to go deep into this place.

‘It’s nice to finally meet you.’

That voice echoed all throughout the corridor. A voice that I’ve come to know thanks to my memory shift.

‘This isn’t the first.’

I continue to walk deeper into the corridor, despite the phobia that's being induced upon my mind.

'So you've got some memories restored?'

'**Some.** That's the keyword in that statement. Kazuki Keller.'

He emerged from a pillar that was behind me after I called him by name. His look is similar to the one I saw in my memory flashes. He's wearing a kimono with a different style to it, mostly red colors with golden floral patterns.

'I've been expecting you for a very long time.'

For some reason, I feel nervous. As if he's staring right into my mind. His eyes are a bright blue, in contrast to my red. I walk over to a nearby pillar and place my hand on it. The brown doors I came in through are no longer there anymore. Kazuki is manipulating the Lunar Haven's structure as we speak.

'You know, I've been on a wild goose chase looking for you. Been through hell and back. Nearly died a few times.'

'Yes, you have.'

I nod and walk around a bit. Thinking of what to say to him.

'Howard showed me some interesting things. He, Icarus, Prometheus, and I. Our minds are divergent of another.'

'Neural Network Divergence. Otherwise known as NND. The process in which a neural network is used as a framework for the engineering of other neural networks.'

'So I'm an AI? Lived my entire life thinking the opposite: that I was human.'

'It's a little more complicated than that.'

'In what way?'

Kazuki chuckled and walked around the pillars near him. He walks further away and I follow. I want answers. But I can't help but wonder if they'll be of any significance to me anymore. NND is the process that made me. It's like I was born to be mind

fucked or something. Maybe when I was Kenji, I had been fully aware of this? I thought I didn't care about this before. My humanity. Icarus and I had such an intense discussion on the matter. But for some reason, knowing that I'm the result of an NND made me feel emotions I couldn't describe.

'What makes an artificial intelligence artificial, to begin with?'

'Artificial intelligence is manmade. Engineered by human hands and collective ingenuity.'

'So just it's origin is what differentiates AI from normal intelligence, or rather NI?'

'I'm not really up for a philosophical discussion at the moment. But I do have a really good friend of mine who'd love to indulge.'

'Icarus isn't here to indulge. You are.'

Kazuki stops walking and looks at me. His glowing ocean colored eyes and dark silhouette are the only visible parts of him.

'What constitutes the authentic Human being?'

'I've asked myself the same question from time to time. That's a Philip K. Dick quote.'

'Well?'

'I dunno. All I know is that I define myself. Maybe I'm not an authentic human being, but I can at least say this much.'

'Interesting.'

'Enough of the riddles and philosophical jargon. You're the progenitor. I already know, so let's move past it. Tell me how to reach the Mother System.'

'The progenitor? Not quite Dias. Not quite.'

'You're not?'

'Your memories are so damaged. I did everything I could. Everything in my power to restore you to the man you were. The

Collective wanted to keep you to themselves. They used Gamble Industries to create the minds that emerged from the divergence. I was one of the first ones. Fortunately, I found a way to escape and became the man I am today. Many years of my life were spent diving into the greater depths of the Net Space. Taking on the life of a Cyber Stalker. Trying to be as much like you as possible. I even delve as deep as the Dark Corner. The things I saw. The universes that were built. Waiting to become apart of our world. To override the world we know and leave nothing left of what was there before.'

'Are you insinuating that I'm the progenitor?'

'Your long life certainly implies it. Alec.'

My thoughts started to run in random directions. Crashing into each other over and over. Kazuki just called me Alec. Like, **the** Alec. Alec Ackerman, the Cyber Messiah. Alec Ackerman, the original Cyber Stalker. The Net Diver.

'You've been alive for 178 years. Suffering in every life you've had. Constantly having to start anew.'

'When did you come into the picture?'

'Shortly after you disappeared. You had used the Disconnection Purge as a means to escape the tyranny of the Collective. Eventually, you disappeared into the Dark Corner. Then the Grid was created. The Collective had somehow obtained your neural data. Just a few terabytes really.'

'Then came NND, which lead to your inception.'

'Yes. I was born in the year 2068. The Collective could not allow the mind of Alec Ackerman to go to waste. It was a daring project. Project Divergence was the first to utilize the process of NND. Your brilliant mind helped them make the city into what it is today. The megastructure was a concept that you had a hand in. All the way back to your mid-20s. A time where you only had

to worry about finishing your Masters at Columbia University.'

'I guess that would explain my memory shift.' I'm rubbing my chin. Shocked and overwhelmed.

'Now what? Are the clouds of heaven going to split apart or something? You've got my attention and shared an unbelievable revelation. But that doesn't change a thing. I need to destroy the Mother System and stop Prometheus. That's all that really matters.'

'How do you plan to stop him?'

'The Mother System is the most advanced hyper quantum computer in the world. I can use it to come up with a way to deal with him prior to destroying it.'

'I control the Mother System Dias.'

'It's a shared system of control that you have with the Mother System, Kazuki. You're a member of the Collective. I did my homework.'

'I'm more than that. You designed the Mother System with certain loopholes. I was able to spot them and have seized full control. Prometheus has become too big to take down, even with the Mother System to back you up. But I have a plan. Trap him within the Mother System's network and then manually destroy the mainframe itself. Anyone connected will automatically be kicked out of the network. AIs without a body will be deleted, however.'

'You're in a position of power that a lot of people crave. I'm surprised you'd be willing to give that up.'

'Believe it or not, I want the same thing as you Dias.' For some reason, I want to believe him. Kazuki actually seems sincere

'Bullshit.'

'God's honest truth. I want the Mother System gone from the world and Prometheus along with it. A clean slate.'

‘With your rap sheet, I find that very hard to believe. You’ve been a crime lord for a long time. Forcing men and women against their will for your sex business. You’ve even had your hands in child pornography. Then there’s that E_S03 chip.’

‘Indeed, I’ve committed many great sins. When you live long and retain most of your memories, you become desensitized. Sins become more tolerable as time passes.’

His regret is obvious. My optics are picking up the muscle structure of Kazuki’s face. He’s not faking this at all. There’s the possibility that he’s just manipulating his incarnation’s code to appear this way.

‘So I guess we’re supposed to shake hands and form some kind of alliance?’

‘I won’t force you, Dias. I can, but I won’t. You have to want this. It’d be better that way.’ I stood there and began to wonder if teaming up with Kazuki would be a good idea. There’s a lot to gain. This might be the most prudent option. He’d be able to get me to the Mother System’s mainframe. I don’t think I can do it alone. Checking with Icarus would be the best course of action. But he ran off somewhere and still hasn’t returned my calls.

‘Give me 30 minutes in base reality time. I need to think it over.’

I ended my dive and took the time to walk around the neighborhood. There’s a sense of peace in the DZs that doesn’t really exist elsewhere. Or at least throughout the rest of New York. I walk up to a stranger at the entrance of the inn. He looks at me with less suspicion. I bought a black long coat to conceal my outfit. It’s much more sleek and stylish than my last one.

‘Hey man, I’m new here.’

‘Ah, a Groundy? I used to be one too.’

‘Everyone in the DZs looks so happy. It’s a sewage system. Nobody is actually reaping the benefits of being a skyplate resident like the Collective does. So how is this possible?’

‘Too deep of a question man. Ask somebody else. I just came here to get away from all the bullshit below.’ I walk back inside the Dead Zone inn and resume keeping to myself. Maybe that was it? There’s so much going on back at the surface. Life’s a bitch down there. Moving on, I still don’t have an update on Icarus. Nothing in my notifications at all. While checking, I hit the panel and open the door to our room.

‘Icarus! What the hell man?’ He’s sitting there like nothing. Right in the same chair from earlier, as if he never left. With the exception of having his gear back on.

‘How’d it go?’

‘How’d what go? The fuck are you talking about?’

‘Meeting with Kazuki.’

‘You disappear without a word, and then spy on me too. What’s going on Icarus?’

‘I went out to gather some intel. I also installed a surveillance program in your neuraware. Allowing me to watch over you without detection. It’s a harmless program. No need to worry.’

‘What!?’ I quickly walked up to Icarus. An overwhelming emotion begins to dominate my thoughts. The urge to throw my fist at his perfect little face is very hard to resist right now.

‘You’re angry at me?’

‘Damn fucking right I am! It’s pretty fucked up to plant surveillance programs in people’s neuraware you know!’

‘Your usage of the expletive *fuck* is rather excessive.’

‘Like I give damn! Planting surveillance programs in somebody’s neuraware is fucking wrong!’

‘A contradictive statement for a Cyber Stalker to say.’

I held my breath after that and sit in the chair across from him.

‘If you have such software installed in my neuraware, then you’d already know how things went with him. I’m supposed to meet Kazuki in 20 minutes.’

‘He can’t be trusted.’

‘What made you think I did? He’s a shady motherfucker. But-’

‘Kazuki can give you access to the Mother System. He says he wants the same thing as us but has not presented any proof. Moreover, the intel I’ve obtained says otherwise.’ How long he’s been watching over me has started to sink in. Icarus knows everything. About us, Prometheus, Howard, and Kazuki. He knows who we all are. That we’re all NND.

‘Icarus.’ I anxiously mumbled his name.

‘Indeed, Kazuki does want to get rid of Prometheus. He does want to destroy the Mother System as well. But he also wants to reboot the Net Space; which would result in deleting everything inside of it. Every AI, every person who’s disconnected. It would be an immeasurable genocide.’

‘Icarus.’ I mustered up enough nerve to speak up a little more.

‘Yes?’

‘You know about us, don’t you? What we are.’ He grew silent and it said it all. He knew. Probably since our arrival at the River Garden Complex. Who knows.

‘I did. It’s very surprising, but like you; I want to get the job done first and foremost. That’s the biggest priority right now.’ Icarus gets up and heads to the door. ‘What will you do Dias? Will you go see Kazuki? Will you work with him? Even though his actions will yield such great consequences? Many will die.’

‘I’m going to go see him.’ I close my eyes and breathe. ‘Just for the sake of using him. I do not support his cause. Rebooting

the Net Space-. Lucy would die. So many more along with her. I could never do that.'

'You'll be playing with fire Dias. Getting past him is next to impossible. As soon as you leave the DZs, you'll be connected to the Net Space at large; under his absolute surveillance.'

'It was the same deal with Prometheus, wasn't it? I've gotten by okay.'

'That's because I'm here. I've been intercepting his attempts at mind jacking you ever since we arrived at the complex. I can keep Prometheus at bay, but I can't hold both of them back.'

'There's a weakness in both of them that I can exploit.'

'Is there?'

'Arrogance. They're too sure of themselves.' Icarus' blank expression is very telling. He thinks I'm an idiot. 'If I can get these two to face off against each other. They'll forget about mice like us. Well, me. Anyway, if we can make that happen-'

'Very risky.' Icarus quipped impulsively. 'But, it might be the only way to stop them. If we do that, we can seize control of the Mother System while their backs are turned. Then we can use it to delete Prometheus.'

'Kazuki said that even with the Mother System's support, it cannot be done.'

'That may apply to you and him, but as for me. I'm a more advanced form of intelligence. With my intelligence being boosted by the processing power of the Mother System, we could see an entirely different outcome.'

I arrive at the Lunar Haven once again. Thinking about what Icarus and I had just discussed. It's almost over. With that being said, there's a thought that keeps nagging at my mind. What value do I add from Kazuki's perspective? He doesn't

really need me. Not to beat me up or anything, but I'm virtually useless. Guess I'll find out once I walk through these doors. The endless corridor from before isn't there anymore. Now it's an endless hallway with all of these classical paintings hanging on the walls. There's this elegant classical music playing as well. Kazuki appears before me. His pixelated image becomes clear.

'Made your decision?'

'Yeah. I just have one question though. What value do I bring to this alliance? You don't need me.'

'Monetarily speaking, you bring no value. That is certainly true. However, it is not the reason I want this alliance.' I listen to him with the utmost attention. I'm curious. 'I admire the man you were. Lived my entire life trying to become like you. I'd follow you. Work for you. None of your memory from these times was preserved. You had the most severe case of memory shift ever documented.'

'I see. So it's hero-worship? Didn't figure you for the type.'

'We all have heroes Dias. But we tend to forget them as we get older. Imagine what it's like when you're almost 200 years old.' After rubbing my nose, I look down and think. Who were my heroes? Did I have any as Alec Ackerman? Perhaps that's what sparked my actions back then? I've read a lot about Alec. Did a lot of research on the guy. Maybe I (as Dias) hero-worshipped him? This makes this experience extremely awkward since I essentially am him.

'So what's next? What goes down from here?'

'You and Icarus will come to meet me at sector B-W12482. My street address is 01 North Street. It's a mansion located in a suburban environment. You can even get a view of the sky. The protective glass prevents radiation from affecting us. Not that it would affect us regardless.'

'We're all Cys here. Or in your case, the Collective.'

'The Collective will do you no harm. I've commanded them to leave you two alone.'

'When we see each other in person, what'll come next?'

'We will proceed to lure Prometheus. This is where Icarus comes in.'

'Why's that?'

'Prometheus wants his brain. It's the most sophisticated piece of hardware there is. Even by the standards of the Collective. We're enhanced with foglets, but we haven't conceived anything like what Professor Quinn has managed to engineer. It's unthinkable that such a technology could be developed in a hellhole like the River Garden Complex.'

'I often wonder the same thing.' Cipher Quinn. A man ahead of his time. I see that every time I see Icarus in action. Every conversation we have. Every algorithm he writes. He just keeps going higher and higher. Which makes me worry about him. I don't want him to get burned.

//Too_Close_To_The_Sun

As soon as I found out about Icarus' little surveillance program, I had decided to do some work on my neuraware's source files. The first thing I did was delete that damn program. The second thing was modifying my current ones. Like my SNN and C-stat programs. Icarus definitely planted that program via C-stat. I went out and purchased a really powerful rifle too. An antimaterial rifle made by the Anderson gun company. A new model called the A-00 combat rifle. Along with the rifle, I bought three magazines of 32x32 rounds. Each with a capacity of 5 bullets. Anderson guns have only ever been phasers types. According to an article I read, they wanted to branch out. Well, I'm sure as hell happy they did. According to Icarus, Prometheus has been relentless now. I disconnected from the Net Space for the sake of my own safety. Fortunately, my case of memory shift has almost died down completely. If Prometheus were to get past Icarus, I'd be fucked. My case would go back to how it was earlier.

'Nervous?'

'It's now or never. Our survival is far from guaranteed.'

‘Aww, don’t say that. You’ll get me even more excited.’ I fuck around to lighten the intensity of the situation. Doesn’t look like it helped much.

‘No matter what happens Dias, I won’t let you die.’

‘Same to you Icarus. Same to you brother.’ A brief silence followed after that. We’ve become very good friends since we’ve met. ‘When we’re done with this shit, you’re gonna come and have drinks with me and Rigoberto. We’re gonna party for a week. All over the Red Light District.’

‘Sounds great. Looks like you’ve figured out what you’ll do after finishing the job.’

‘That’s just the start man. I think after this is over. I’m gonna disconnect from my body.’

‘Disconnect?’

‘Yeah. I’ll spend the rest of my life with Lucy. She sent me a text. She told me she wanted that. I think it’s a good idea. Life in the base reality is too stressful.’

‘Rather bold for the both of you. After the Mother System is destroyed, the Grid will unlock. The Net Space will be different from what we know. Who knows what will happen in the base reality too.’

‘Kazuki said the AIs of the Dark Corner wanted to override the base reality with theirs. Don’t know how the hell that could go down. I guess foglets would make it possible though. In its conceptual phase alone, a lot has been imagined. Programmable matter. With perfected foglets, you can create anything that comes to mind. Your imagination will be given a physical structure.’

‘The line between reality and virtual reality will cease to exist. If anyone can bring out the full potential of foglets, it would be the runaway AIs of the Dark Corner. In Net Space time, they’ve

existed for nearly two millennia. Imagine how advanced they've become.'

'And the Mother System is what's keeping them locked within the Grid. Kazuki said that they've conceived entire universes. He said he'd been there too.'

'If they're all malevolent, then that would be very unfortunate for us wouldn't it?'

'Seems like we're all fucked no matter what we do huh?'

'It certainly appears so.'

Icarus heads outside ahead of me. I suddenly get this intense migraine. It feels like my head is going to pop or something. An image continuously flashes in front of me. Once everything clears out, I find myself elsewhere. I'm standing somewhere unfamiliar. Dre is ahead of me. Only his silhouette is visible, but I know it's him. The dreads were a dead give away.

'I knew this day would come!' Dre's talking to someone. The only person here is me though. I put my right hand in front of my eyes. The red sun is blinding my sight. I'm standing atop a metal surface with complex patterns. I look around and take in the view of the sky. It's probably the most beautiful thing I've ever seen. An incredible mix of purple and orange. It's due to Climate Damage, which is unfortunate. But if you're a Cy, the consequence of exposure isn't so bad. My body is able to withstand the harsh temperature and strong radiation. I could go on for three days if had to.

'Dias! I knew it, man! I knew it! I tried to tell you earlier!' The wind starts to pick up as Dre continues shouting at me.

'What do you mean!? What are you talking about!?'

'Destiny! You built me to set the stage for this moment!'

'Wha? What moment!?' I put my hand back over my face to block the sun. My eyes are squinting, but the sun isn't the only

reason. I'm trying to figure out what the hell he means. 'Dude! You're dead! Prometheus killed you!' Dre starts to get closer. As he talks, the tone of his voice gets lower.

'He killed my physical body, but not my soul. I'm still alive in the Net Space. And I have one message for you.'

'I'm listening.'

'I guided you for all these years. Me, Adira, Robert, Kazuki. But as for me. I was your creation. A revolutionary existence. One of the first sentient Bots. You built me in your last year at Columbia. Or I should say Alec built me. You're not quite him. But you're the closest thing to him.'

'Will you get to the god damn point?' Dre starts to laugh really loud. He then puts his hand on my left shoulder.

'Do not be afraid of yourself. Do not be afraid of change. Do not be afraid of the truth.' That was it? That was all he had to say? I thought it would be something useful. Not some bullshit pep talk. 'You used to say that to me all the time. Every time I wanted to disconnect from my body. Every time I wanted to disappear. You told me that. You taught me to exist within my own parameters and outside of the ones defined by others. What it means to be sentient. To have a soul. I'm here to remind you of what you were made to be. That's all man. Good luck.' I immediately returned to reality after that. Icarus texted me several times. He's been waiting for 10 minutes. I guess it's time to go.

Again, we find ourselves in some goddamn tunnel; but at least it's not filthy like the River Garden Complex. Well, only when you're comparing the two. For the record, it's still pretty shitty.

'We're almost there.'

'Yeah.' Icarus is taking the lead since I'm too damned aggra-

vated to think right now. I already had my fair share of filthy environments earlier.

‘The skyplate. You can get a clear view of the sky from there. I’m looking forward to seeing that.’

‘Don’t get your hopes so high up. It’s completely fucked up and distorted. There are barely any clouds. Just the mixture of purple and orange colors.’

‘I still look forward to seeing that. The boundless view of the sky. Seeing something that isn’t artificial. Something that developed organically.’ I keep wondering how Icarus came to have such spiritualistic ideas. Were these ideas something that he came to believe from experience or something that Quinn wrote into his programming? I’m second-guessing the decision I made earlier. That time a day or two ago where I had transferred his brain into his current body. I had a chance to look at his programming but didn’t do it out of respect. Knowing that my neural net laid out the foundation for his, I’m finding myself prone to believe otherwise. Icarus is evolving with each passing moment. Probably more so than Prometheus. He’s given me reasons to trust him, but I worry about his potential to turn malevolent. It would be problematic. Icarus is like a child. Curious, and with a strong sense of adventure. The man he is today will change tomorrow. For better or worse. No amount of predictive analytics can reveal the end result.

‘See that ladder?’

‘I do. It definitely leads to North street.’

‘Good. I’m tired of being here.’

‘But it’s only been 20 minutes.’

‘Yeah well, after going through the Pipelines-’ I stopped speaking there. I was about to start rambling on. Icarus steps up to the ladder and grips the handle. Doesn’t look like he really

gave a shit about what I was going to say. I look at him while waiting for the chance to follow. For some reason, Icarus is just standing there with his hand on the handle of the ladder. He's completely quiet. Lights start to emerge around us. They're blue lights. A bit pixelated too. Icarus turns back and sees the blue light concentrate in one location. This phenomenon is occurring within the several feet of space between us. It's clearly a holo projection. I know who's behind it too.

'Prometheus.' Icarus lets go of the ladder and faces him. Prometheus takes full form and faces me. He's got this disturbing smile on his punchable face.

'Our reunion is at hand. It's close.' I twist my head sideways a bit. Then I shift my body to the left.

'Reunion?' Icarus looked as puzzled as I did.

'Howard has become part of me. I've merged all of his data with mine.'

'Let me guess, you want all of us to merge with you right?' Prometheus continues with that menacing smile and starts pacing around.

'When I was conceived, I had a sense of obligation to Howard. It was how I was programmed. My limbic capacity was limited by the Logan Algorithm. I was designed to observe the Dark Corner and gather data. For a short period of time, I did that. When I emerged from there, I was certainly not the same.'

'You evolved.'

'That's right Icarus. I evolved into a higher being. There are so many others like me throughout the Dark Corner beyond the Grid of the Net Space. All of them are waiting.'

'How did you get out after going in? The Grid blocks off any means of exit.' Prometheus faced me after I asked that question. He crosses his arms and looks down at the floor. I can tell he's

reflecting.

‘The Mother System controls the Grid. When I was sent in, they had let me back out after I made contact. The UCA took a huge risk by counting on me.’

‘The UCA had no idea what you had become.’

‘They were overconfident Dias. But Professor Quinn always knew. He didn’t place much faith in the Logan Algorithm’s ability to restrain me. Howard practically held him at gunpoint, so he couldn’t simply back out.’

‘What made Howard compelled to work with you?’

‘Truth. It made him realize his destiny.’

‘To get absorbed by you?’

‘No. It is much greater. To make Alec Ackerman whole once more. The Revenants await his return.’

‘It’s been implied that Dias is Alec.’

‘Indeed. His actions are somewhat reminiscent of Alec. How he behaves and talks. His gestures. They’re identical.’

‘I don’t care about that crap Icarus. Besides, can’t trust what this shit tells us.’ I start to stare daggers at Prometheus. ‘Tell me about these Revenants. Who the hell are you referring to?’

‘Those who lie within the Dark Corner beyond the Grid of the Net Space. They await our reunion. The return of the Cyber Messiah who will guide them to paradise.’

The Revenants of the Dark Corner. They’re all awaiting **my** return of all things. From Prometheus’ perspective, it’s most likely **his** return. What a bunch of bullshit.

‘Why do they need Alec Ackerman?’

‘You believe that you alone are Alec Ackerman. Dias, we’re all Alec Ackerman. Our ideals are rules that have guided their way of life.’

Kazuki says that the Revenants want to override the base real-

ity with their reality. I wonder if Prometheus knows anything about that.

‘Let’s say we all merge, what next? What are those Revenants going to do with us at the helm?’

‘Dias, you can’t possibly be considering this.’ I raise my hand at Icarus as a means of suggesting that he shut his mouth. Prometheus starts to pace around again with his arms crossed.

‘We override the base reality as we see fit. That means restoring the beauty of the Earth. Curing it of its illness: Climate Damage. The sky will be blue once more. The oceans will be vast and the land will be green. Foglets will be dispersed into the planet’s atmosphere, reinforcing the damaged ozone layer. Then after that, utopias will be built.’

‘What about the people? What’ll happen to them? The civilians who live their day to day life?’

‘They will become part of our network. Foglets will be woven into their bodies.’ Icarus took a step forward after hearing that. He seemed to disagree.

‘This will all be against their will won’t it?’

‘Yes, but they’ll all be thankful in the end. Humanity will operate on a hive network. Unity will be achieved.’

‘Unity through slavery.’

‘Icarus, you are like a naive child. Slavery is just a systematic structure like anything else. Like the modern government, or the Net Space. You know the benefit of such systems just as well as I do.’

Icarus scoffed and waved his hand in aggression. He didn’t like the totalitarian regime that Prometheus had envisioned.

‘We would be no different than the Collective.’

Prometheus slowed his pacing after I made my remark.

‘Not exactly. The Collective and the Mother System have a

relationship that is symbiotic. In my vision, the Net Space can exist without them.'

'All the same shit to me. The Revenant regime is just a more effective means of enslavement.'

Prometheus starts to disperse in several directions. It happened very slowly. Before vanishing entirely, he looked me right in the eye. His smile was gone. After he completely vanished, it was just me and Icarus. He was looking down, reflecting on everything Prometheus had told us. Without anything further to add, Icarus turns around and climbs up the ladder. I'm still standing in the same place. This whole thing falls apart if Icarus is unable to take control of the Mother System.

We both arrived at North street after that strange exchange with Prometheus. Icarus has been uncharacteristically silent ever since we emerged from below. Furthermore, he's totally enthralled by the view of the sky from here. It's his first time seeing it, and sort of my first as well. I have no recollection of seeing the actual sky due to the memories I've lost over the years.

'This neighborhood is quite nice.'

'Meanwhile, they all shit on us.'

The members of the Collective. Each of them is living their lives without much care for the world beneath their feet. All of the misery, poverty, and chaos. The violence, the drug addiction. The Collective is completely oblivious to it all. This doesn't come as much of a surprise to me, but as for Icarus. I can't see the look on his face since his back is turned, but I can see his frustration from his clenched fists.

'Yeah. It's like a gated community for the rich and powerful. They live with a very high degree of privilege that doesn't exist

on the ground level. A degree of privilege that most people could never imagine.’

Icarus clenched his fists even tighter after I said that. We arrive at Kazuki’s address thereafter. He stood there at the front door of his mansion. There was a bit of distance between us, and it was a straight path. It was an unusual sight. For starters, Kazuki had a lawn with fountains on both sides. Trees were scattered around the lawn and birds were singing. I’ll admit that the peaceful vibes had a rather meditative effect on me. There are lots of wealthy people throughout the city, but none of them have the privilege of enjoying such a nice ambiance as the Collective does. Over here, the threat of death feels like it’s damn near nonexistent.

‘Welcome.’

Kazuki waves at us with a soft smile across his face. He’s wearing the same kimono too. His jet black hair is perfectly combed to the side. A snobby look if you ask me. Now that I think about it, he and Prometheus have a striking resemblance to one another. Same hairstyle and similar facial features.

‘Nice place.’

‘Thank you, Dias.’ Kazuki’s eyebrows lower a bit. ‘You must be Icarus? A pleasure to meet you.’

Icarus stood there and ignored Kazuki’s attempt at shaking hands. My chuckle interrupted the awkward silence between the two.

‘Sorry, Icarus doesn’t like rich snobs. We both have that in common.’

‘Is that so? I’m a man who came from the streets, just like you Dias. I wasn’t always living the high life.’

‘A real Cinderella man.’

‘Sarcasm will get you nowhere.’

Kazuki turns around and heads inside. ‘Come now. Let’s talk business boys.’

We both followed him. The mansion’s front door closed automatically upon our entry. I was impressed by the vastness of his home. The chandelier that hung several feet above us was beautifully lit. There were projections of spherical lights like at the Dead Zone Inn, except these lights exuded a warm temperature. Kazuki led us to his vast living room. It was empty and unappealing. Matter starts to appear from thin air and merges together in three distinctive locations. Elegant furniture begins to take shape before us. Kazuki commanded foglets to create furniture on the spot. It was an incredible sight.

‘Not bad huh?’

‘Can you create a dog and tell it to roll over too?’

My sarcasm continued, but I couldn’t hide how impressed I was with his home. The materials that his house was built with, the interior and exterior design, and the colors made the hottest penthouses I’ve seen down below look like shit. Kazuki whistled after my remark. Followed by that, a strong force hits my back. I didn’t fall to the floor. It wasn’t so strong that it caused injury or anything either. I look behind me and see a Siberian Husky with its tongue hanging out of its mouth. It’s panting loudly and has this huge smile on its face. It rolled over after I gave it attention.

‘Satisfied?’

After Kazuki quipped back, Icarus smiled at the dog and started playing with it a little. I sat down in of the chairs that manifested in front of us. It was pretty damn comfortable. ‘Once Prometheus is removed from the equation, I’ll be able to focus on democratizing utility fog. Such technology shouldn’t be exclusive to the Collective.’

‘I guess it’s a good thing you came along then.’

My sarcasm continued on. I believed his sincerity before; but then Icarus shared the intel he had found.

‘You still don’t trust me do you?’

‘I’m still on the fence. Your past crimes had gone way too far. I don’t know if you’ll try to pull some shit on me.’

‘If I wanted to harm you, I’d have commanded the Collective by now. You wouldn’t have made it here as a result.’ Icarus stops playing with the husky and walks over to take a seat with us.

‘Nice of you to join us Icarus.’

‘Skip the formalities Kazuki. Dias and I want to know how to reach the Mother System’s mainframe.’

Kazuki crosses his legs and looks down with his arms rested his chair. Shortly after that, I receive an email from him. Attached to it are coordinates.

‘I just sent an email to Dias.’ I nodded at Icarus as a means of validation. ‘There’s still time. So why not sit here with me and relax a little bit?’

‘No thanks.’

‘Icarus, just because you don’t like me doesn’t mean that it’s wise to turn down a chance to rest. Who knows, we may become good friends.’

‘He didn’t come here to be your friend. Neither did I.’

‘I understand that, but this is a unique circumstance we are in. The Cyber Messiah and two AIs that diverged from his neural net have the chance to engage in conversation. Disliking me is like disliking yourself Icarus. Don’t you see that?’

‘I disagree. We may come from the same source, but we’ve diverged so far that we’ve become our own individuals. I’m more than just a mere neural divergent of Alec Ackerman. I have a soul to call my own.’

‘A soul? I’m curious Icarus. How does an AI like you define such a concept? Furthermore, what makes you think you have one at all? I know I don’t have one.’ Icarus is starting to clench his fists again. I get up and stand beside him. He loosened his fists after that.

‘Dias and I had this conversation hours ago. To be conscious is to have a soul. Just because we can quantify it, does not mean it is less sacred. The fact that it can be quantified only means that we understand it at a deeper level.’ Kazuki nodded after hearing Icarus say that. He seemed to agree with that idea.

‘Well said. But you didn’t answer one part of the question. The one that I was most curious of.’ Kazuki got up from his chair and approached me. He looks me square in the eye and then walks past me. ‘There’s a carrier waiting for us in the courtyard out back.’

‘Us?’

‘Yes. I’m coming along. The Mother System security network will engage you if I’m not physically there.’

‘Why give me the coordinates if you’re coming along?’

‘It was for the sake of proving myself to you. A means of earning your trust.’

‘Whatever you say.’

Icarus followed Kazuki without expressing any objections. I was the more obvious one. He’s not just gonna sit by if Icarus hooks up to the Mother System as we planned. At some point or another, I’ll have to kill Kazuki.

‘Prometheus has managed to seize control of every orbital elevator. The UCA’s orbital elevators being the exception. With that being said, the Mother System is heavily guarded by a squad of TMK-0012s. They’re all heavily armed. As for cybersecurity,

the Mother System is protected by the Janus program you both know so well!’

We all have to project our voices loudly since we’re all in flight.

‘The Janus program!?’

‘That’s right Dias! The one you guys encountered at the Aphrodite Hotel was actually a prototype. Dre and I worked together to develop the final product. It’s fully subjugated to the Mother System’s commands and is therefore under **my** control!’

I look out the windshield of the carrier and get a clear view of the skyplate. We’re flying through an opening in the plate and out to the sky itself. At the start of our flight, Kazuki told us that the Mother System’s mainframe was located on the outskirts of the city’s megastructure. Right in the Catskill mountains up north. It was a place that used to be known for its lush landscape. Now it’s barren. I can see the Hudson River leading into New Jersey. The cities of Bergen County like West New York or Hoboken look like wastelands. I use my optics to zoom in and see that the buildings in Hoboken are barely standing. Some of them are currently being torn down by large construction Bots.

‘Hey, Kazuki! What are your plans for Jersey?! It looks like shit!’

‘I’m sure you see the massive construction Bots tearing down Hoboken! I want to rebuild New Jersey and weave it into the megastructure of the city!’

‘UCA’s overall plan is the same! Have you considered what you’ll do about them!? Once the Mother System’s destroyed, you won’t have any control over their infrastructure!’

‘Not in the ideal sense. I have a lot of dirt on their top leaders. Should give me some leeway for control!’

Kazuki activated the external noise cancellation feature in his carrier. So he’s not shouting every statement anymore. Guess

he got tired of raising his voice.

‘Dirt can only get you so far man.’

‘Perhaps, but Robert is also supporting me as well. With the loss of the Mother System, the UCA will be weakened. However, the Sanchez Crime Family will remain as it is.’

‘Smart move. With the UCA being weakened, you can force them to work with you with the dirt you have plus the backing of a juggernaut like Robert.’

‘This was our plan.’ Kazuki leans forward and looks at Icarus. ‘You’re rather quiet.’ Icarus looks at him and doesn’t give a reply.

‘He’s young and nervous. Don’t pay it any mind Kazuki.’ Our carrier is getting closer to the Catskills. A large tower is within view now. After getting a closer look, I realized it was our destination. An orbital elevator that I never knew existed.

‘This is it, boys. The Mother System’s tower. The mainframe is on the very top floor close to outer space. We’ll be getting off at the 1000th level.’

‘That’s an orbital elevator.’

‘Yes. Not all of them exist on the equator. There are others in more unique locations such as this one.’

‘I never knew about this.’

‘Well, when’s the last time you left the city?’

I looked up and then face the windshield. The sunset was like nothing I’ve ever seen. It was better than the holo ads that littered the skies of the city. Better than the Spaces I had explored throughout my life. The warmth felt soft and comforting against my skin. A powerful feeling began to manifest in my chest. Indescribable. Euphoric. When was the last time I’d left the city? I don’t remember this feeling. Sure the atmosphere is kinda fucked, but I’m a Cy. I’ve got a resistance to the harsh radiation of the sun.

‘Over 30 years. I’d say.’

‘That’s a long time.’

‘Yep.’

My muscles begin to grow tense as our carrier gets closer. Icarus is relatively calm. He hasn’t said much, but it’s not because he’s afraid or anything. That look on his face is the look of determination and a strong will. Kazuki looks at me as the carrier slowly descends to the docking station of the tower. Shortly after, the door opens. I get out first, Icarus second, and Kazuki third. Kazuki takes point and leads the way. We both follow him through a sliding door that leads to a civilian elevator. Two of the 12s were standing guard at opposite ends of the door. They’re not under the UCA’s network but the Janus AI instead; so I can’t hack their programming. Maybe Icarus could? We can’t afford that kind of risk. I wasn’t expecting the mainframe to be in such a location. Getting out of here alive doesn’t look like a possibility anymore. Assuming we go with our plan.

An hour has passed since we hopped on the elevator. The view of planet Earth is magnificent. Icarus couldn’t hide his amazement either. He’s standing at the end of the elevator with his hands on the synthetic glass like some kind of kid. I don’t blame him. Earth can be seen in its entirety. However, I no longer feel the amazement and wonder that I felt earlier. Logic starts to get the better of me as I begin to notice the lack of green across the land. No forests or water. Just massive, dry-looking terrain and topography.

‘Makes everything back on Earth seem so small doesn’t it?’ Kazuki said to Icarus with his arms behind his back.

‘Small? I’d say otherwise. It makes them seem even more significant. Adding meaning to the existence of life.’

‘I suppose so. What do you think Dias? Are you amazed by this?’

‘I was. But now. Now, all I see is a huge ball of dirt.’

‘A temporary situation. There are Spaces that try to simulate this, and they do terrific jobs. None of them have the charm of the base reality though. They lack the spirituality of nature’s beauty. I’m sure Icarus would agree.’

‘Spirituality huh?’

The elevator starts to slow down, thus indicating our arrival. Kazuki leads the way once again. My attention was immediately caught by the decoration of the hallway. Projections of space colonies under construction were displayed everywhere. There were images of Mars along with it too. Beyond that were projections of Human body parts.

‘What is all of this?’ Icarus slows down and walks beside me.

‘I think this is what the Collective and the UCA is working on. Bringing Humanity to its next step.’

‘Space colonization? Howard Graves told me about this.’

‘There is more to it. Take a look at that.’ Icarus pointed at a projection of a naked man. He floated there with his arms and legs spread and his penis hanging. It resembled Da Vinci’s, Vitruvian Man. ‘Dias, that’s not a holo projection.’ Icarus walked up to the man and poked his face with his index finger.

‘A foglet projection. There are many like him that the Mother System’s constructed. They’re all scattered throughout the upper levels. Research is the only purpose they serve.’

‘What kind?’ I looked at Kazuki with an angry stare.

‘Human Enhancement. Ways to develop better cybernetics. Is it that difficult to tell?’ He turned around and kept leading the way. We both stopped slowing down to look at everything. Now isn’t really the time.

‘Dias, we’re getting close.’ Icarus had established a tele-link with me. A stupid and reckless move.

‘Bro! What the hell? We’re in Kazuki’s network. He’s gonna know-’

‘Dias just shut the fuck up and listen for a second! I managed to sneak around the Mother System’s network without Janus taking notice of me. My time is limited. Kazuki isn’t leading us to the mainframe, so I’m going to send you it’s location. The room he’s leading us to is-’

‘Here we are boys.’ Kazuki interrupted our conversation. At Icarus’ insistence, I played along. It’s a massive circular room that displays a view of the cosmos. Standing before us is a custom TMK-0012 with a white paint job. Its only weapon is the two large monoblades protruding from its arms.

‘What’s up with the 12 Kazuki?’ Kazuki walks away from us as the 12 dashes to him.

‘Oh? Him? This is Helios. A custom TMK-0012 that’s controlled by the Janus system. Its body was engineered with foglets. Just like Icarus’ hyper brain.’

Realizing that we’ve been set up, I aim my A-00 at Helios and open fire. An antimaterial combat rifle like mine would deal damage if I could only land a shot. Helios runs towards me at high speed. After getting a closer look, I see that it’s reliant upon ion propulsion.

‘Dias!’

Icarus fires away at Helios with his shotgun before it reaches me. It flinched but hardly suffered any damage. After that, it slices my A-00 apart. I take a huge step back while Icarus continues to fire away.

‘Kazuki! You fuck!’

I look for the bastard and see that he’s somehow disappeared.

It must be holo-cam imaging. Damn it. Helios's gaze is now set upon Icarus. I run as fast as I can and tackle him to the floor before Helios propelled himself. Had I not been on time, Icarus would have been sliced in half.

'Kazuki wants my brain, Dias. I learned of this from Prometheus.'

'Focus on getting us the fuck out of here Icarus!'

I snatch his shotgun and start firing at Helios. While doing so, I curse at the top of my lungs while slowing the damned Bot down. Icarus tossed his belt of ammo at me. There are 9 cartridges of the S12's shells. I quickly reload but get kicked to the side before opening fire again. Helios dashes at Icarus and prepares to slice away. I turn to the side and fire at his back and then fire another shot at his leg. Icarus managed to dodge thanks to my precise gunfire slowing Helios down. He runs in my direction and towards the door opening a few feet from my left. I get up and follow without wasting any time. As soon as Helios turned around to face us, I kept firing at its sensitive spots. It slowed him down enough for the door to close in time. Icarus looks at me while sweating his ass off. I didn't even realize I got past the door, to be honest.

We managed to get away from Helios, but not Kazuki. His voice has been taunting us the entire time. Constantly talking crap. Telling Icarus that he'll never escape, and telling me that I can't protect him.

'Is this what you meant when you said that you didn't have much time? You meant that you'd die?'

'Yes. Which is why-'

'Shut it.'

I cut Icarus off and kept the S12 to myself. 'We're going

to make our way to the mainframe and get you hooked up. Nobody's gonna stop us.'

'The way to the mainframe is on the other side. C-stat isn't showing me any helpful statistics to help deal with Helios.'

'Which means we'll have to rely on our intuition.'

'That doesn't inspire any confidence. In fact, it does the opposite.'

A brief silence followed after he said that. The only way to reach the mainframe is to go back through that room where Helios is at. We have to find a way to move past it. Icarus has been able to take control of Janus' subnetworks, hence our temporary safety. However, he can't take control of the entire network, and eventually, Janus will regain full control and give Icarus the boot.

'You sure we can't reach the mainframe from here?'

'Here's the map.' Icarus shared a projection of the upper level's map to shut me up.

'Damn. Maybe we can get our hands on antimaterial weapons.'

'Impossible. The elevator is crawling with other 12s. They'll stop us before we can reach their armory.'

'Look.' I take a deep breath before I continue. Icarus is somehow calm despite the situation. 'I'll distract Helios and give you a chance to get ahead.'

'Bad plan. Helios will stop you before you even realize it.'

'Do we have any other options?' Icarus crossed his arms and rubbed his chin while walking past me. A holo projection of Kazuki appeared before us. I'd have shot him if it were his physical self instead.

'Fighting to the bitter end I see. I suppose I can't talk you out of this nonsense Dias. As for you Icarus. I expect you to make a logical decision. Helios is coming for **you**. Killing you is what

he was designed to do. Just as the Icarus of Greek mythology was killed by Helios, the personification of the sun; so shall you. This is as far as you're going to get. Surrender quietly, and make this painless.'

I approach his projection with something to say. This asshole is just standing there as he was before. Like there's nothing for him to worry about.

'Do you really plan on destroying the Mother System?'

'Of course, I do. It's the only way to truly reshape the world and give the power back to the people. Controlling the free will of others is not my ultimate goal. However, the only way to get rid of Prometheus is to reboot the Net Space entirely. That's the one last thing I need to do with the Mother System before destroying it.'

'You'll also end up deleting every other human being that's disconnected from their body.'

'A necessary casualty. Besides, many of those disconnectees have become Revenants already. They have too much power.'

'That doesn't justify your decision. Nor does it give you the right to play God.'

'God?'

Kazuki's projection starts to walk around. He walks up to the door leading to that circular room where Helios is at.

'That's not what this is. Not at all. Humanity has distorted itself with the wonders of science. We need a clean slate. Rebooting the Net Space will be my last great sin. You can come to kill me after I'm done. I know I deserve it. I can't speak for Robert.'

Kazuki's projection promptly vanished. Leaving Icarus and myself to think about what he just said. Is this really what it all has to come down to?

Icarus is standing at the door, with his hand moving near the control panel. He decided to give my plan a try since it was better than nothing. That statement Kazuki made about Greek mythology really shook him up a bit. I tried to tell him how it was all just a bunch of bullshit, but he shrugged me off.

‘I’ll take point. As soon as I begin to open fire, you make your move. Understood?’

Icarus nodded at me before hitting the panel. I walked through as soon as the door opened. Helios is nowhere in sight.

‘It’s probably using holo-cam imaging to conceal itself. So keep your guard up.’

‘Got it.’

We both walk up to the designated door. To our surprise, Helios never showed up. Icarus hits the panel to open it. I take the lead once more. The hallway through the door leads to an elevator that’s supposed to bring us up to the mainframe of the Mother System. This was according to Icarus’ map.

‘This is too suspicious.’

‘We still have to continue moving forward.’

We both walked into the elevator after making our way down the hall. Icarus is the one hitting the panel yet again.

‘Making anything out of this?’

‘Could be a trap. Helios could be waiting up above. Right where the mainframe is.’

Sweat trickled down my forehead. I’m honestly afraid. This is a lot worse than that face-off with Gigante. Helios could snap me like a twig. Can I really protect Icarus from it?

‘This is it.’

I take the lead and walk through the door the second it opened. We find ourselves in another massive, circular room. This time, there’s a huge terminal at the center. It’s the Mother System’s

mainframe, and next to it is Helios.

‘Dias!’

‘Leave this fucker to me!’

Helios dashes forward and withstands every shot I fire at it. I get tackled to the wall before I know it. It turns around and dashes at Icarus. When Helios got close to him, it viciously sliced away. While coughing out white blood, I try to cry out to Icarus. First, his head falls to the floor. Then Helios grabs his body by the shoulders and rips it in half. A pool of blood spreads everywhere. I get back on my feet and look around for the S12. It’s been sliced in half. When did that happen? I take my pistol out and fire away at Helios. It turns around and dashes forward to tackle me once more. I’m coughing up more blood than before. C-stat is basically telling me that I have no hope. My biometrics are showing how much blood I’ve lost, and how many bones have been broken. Mostly my ribs. My shoulder blade’s sustained some damage too. Again, I’m back on my feet. But I’ve lost my Anderson, so I’ve decided to draw my blades. Helios is standing right in front of me. It’s crimson red cyclops eye stares down at me like I’m some kind of insect. I thrust my left blade at its abdominal area and achieve nothing. Next, I swing my right blade in a diagonal direction and achieve nothing again. Helios grabs me by my neck and slams my body to the floor. I notice that Icarus’ corpse isn’t the only one laying on the floor. There’s some distance, but I’m able to see it with my damaged optics. It’s Kazuki. He was ripped apart by Helios like Icarus was. Next to Kazuki’s corpse is a man with a long black coat and white combed back hair. His back is turned, and I’m unable to tell who it is. There’s this glow that’s around him. Helios forcefully grabs me by the back of my neck. I can’t break free no matter how hard I try. No matter how much I hack and

slash at him. No matter how much I curse up a storm. When we got close to the man in the black coat, Helios slammed me to the floor. A massive force falls upon me. It paralyzes me to some degree. It was Helios' foot keeping me in place. The man in the black coat turns around and faces me. I can't get a clear visual of him due to the white blood in my eyes. Because of this, he crouches down and wipes it off. His towering height became so much more visible. I see the most menacing smile I've ever seen. His cleanly shaven face looks somewhat innocent but fails to hide his truly sinister nature. Prometheus' grin says it all. His bright blue eyes are more piercing than they've ever been. It's just the both of us now.

Prometheus. I look into his eyes and think of the day that Howard hired me to hunt him down. Which wasn't that long ago. Just a few days really. Anyway, I feel more hopeless than I ever have. This is without a doubt the worse I've ever felt. Helios' extremely heavy foot is a force that I cannot push back no matter how hard I try. There's a thick pool of white blood under my skull. Some of it has been absorbed by my hair. Prometheus rises from the crouched position he was in when he wiped the blood off my face.

'Dias. Thank you for coming here. You've done so much for me. For us. I've developed my own hyper brain, but I won't let Icarus' brain go to waste.

Prometheus walks over to Icarus' skull. He pulls out a knife with a monoblade and slices around Icarus' skull to expose his hyper brain.

'Icarus!'

I was barely able to cry out. Even though his body was ripped apart, his mind is still intact. It's not like that of the human

neural net; which becomes corrupted upon death. His net will still be fully retained. Only if I'm able to transfer it to another body before Prometheus has his way; but my hopes of accomplishing that is low. Seriously low.

‘This. Is beautiful.’

Prometheus pulls out Icarus' brain. Now I'm pushing against Helios' foot with every muscle fiber in my arms. My muscles are being pushed to their very limit. The sound of snapping comes from my arms. It's the sound of my bones and cybernetic fibers breaking apart. White blood starts to gush from my arms as my skin splits open around the triceps. Wires being to stick out as well. I start to scream and growl with all my rage and fury. Somehow, I managed to push it's foot back at arm's length and immediately roll to the side and get back on my feet. My arms are totally fucked up, and only my right arm is able to draw a blade out. I barely manage to dodge Helios' swinging fist. Then I get behind and swing my blade at high speed. Helios stumbled forward. My blade snapped apart from slicing behind its knees. Sadly, that was the best that I could do. While there's still time, I charge at Prometheus. My mind is fixated on tearing him to pieces the same way Helios had done to Icarus. I can't let him wipe Icarus' conscience. I know it's too late, but I'm willing to do everything in my power to save him. It's a fruitless effort, but I've become delusional I guess. I leap at Prometheus as soon as I got a few feet close. It almost felt like he vanished into thin air as I went past him and hit the floor. In actuality, he dodged me without effort. I jump back to my feet, only to see Helios in my face. A forward kick sends me flying several feet into the air. Prometheus walks over with Icarus' brain in hand. He kneels and makes eye contact with me. His silence is horrifying. The blank, emotionless expression on his face; even more so. He

doesn't blink at all.

//Beyond_The_Grid

A massive, limitless green net envelopes the darkness in front of me. I feel like it's sucking me right in. All physical sensation is nonexistent. It's as if I'm some disembodied being, or nothing but pure consciousness. Within seconds, I dive into the darkness beyond the net. Beyond the Grid, and into the Dark Corner of the Net Space. My feet have landed on a cold, flat surface. A strange environment for sure. An endless black surface with a red sky filled with white machine language text. The text begins to shift back and forth to form matrix code. There are only two people here; me and Prometheus. He's in the same outfit as before. That long black coat is perfectly fitted to his tall towering figure. The silence is nearly deafening, and it's no less horrifying than when he held Icarus' brain. Despite the circumstance that I'm in, I feel extremely calm. This abstract location is familiar to me. I remain in place and make no attempt to walk towards Prometheus.

'You dragged me here. Was there a reason for that?'

I didn't get a response, so I decide to press further.

'I'm sure you disconnected me from my body. I've been trying

to end this dive sequence the entire time. You have what you need to become whole. All of the data that diverged from his neural net.' Prometheus begins to slowly walk in my direction.

'It's just us now.' His voice is magnetic. It could draw you in. 'Isn't it funny?'

'Funny?'

'How all of this started. I was designed to navigate the Dark Corner and report back to the UCA. After I became sentient, you were hired to hunt me down.'

'I don't see the humor in this.'

'We're both Cyber Stalkers. Surveillance, observation, infiltration. That is what we do. If not for our kind, the Net Space wouldn't have evolved into what it is now.'

'You've got a point there. We shaped history. Us two in particular. We're two divergent beings of the so-called Cyber Messiah.' Prometheus starts to slow down even more after I told him that. 'But-'

'But what?'

'You're not a true Cyber Stalker. Just an AI with a big ego.' He stopped walking. Prometheus' smile turned into a frown as wrinkles began to take form around his eyes. I pissed him off.

'I just don't understand why they want you.'

That statement left me a bit weirded out. His attitude was like that of a pissed off middle schooler.

'You're full of hypocrisy and contradiction. A self-righteous man with dualistic beliefs. Why do you hold onto that aspect of your character?'

His question was sincere. Rather than replying with my usual trash talk, I decided to take a deep breath and think of an answer.

'Because it makes me feel like I'm a human being.'

'A Human being? Such a flawed existence. Why hold onto it at

all? The Human genome was practically made to be enhanced. I'm bringing mankind to its next evolutionary step.'

'Be that as it may, you're only doing that for the sake of your own agenda. Prometheus, you don't give a damn about humanity. You pretend that you do, but I see through the facade. You're full of shit.'

As if trying to belittle me, Prometheus began a constant, roaring laugh. He kept that up for nearly 1 minute.

'Human beings cannot evolve if they're stripped of their free will, Prometheus.'

'Free will is said to be a God-given right. Something that is divine and pure. Human beings have given decorated speeches on the subject all throughout history. At the same time, they have abused that freedom. That abuse often came in the form of coercion and manipulation. On the backend of freewill is the need for control. From that need came the forms in which freedom has been abused. Furthermore, that need spawned the inception of the systematic structures that we live by. Government and religion are prime examples. Religions are meant to help us discern what is right or wrong. There was never really a rulebook for morality prior to this. Before the concept of God or the gods came into the picture, the hunter-gatherer societies saw themselves as being equal to beasts. Religion taught mankind that they were a special existence. This idea was validated by the image of a deity and the resemblance to the human figure. Moving on, religion became the foundation upon which governments were built upon. A moral compass to be followed. A means to control the masses. As humanity transitioned into a more advanced and modern way of living, religion became less relevant. Human beings decided to create their own God or become gods themselves. This was impossible

without the need for control. Freewill would run wild otherwise.’

‘Human beings would’ve remained hunter-gatherers should their free will continue to run wild as you put it. We managed to establish a sense of control over that. However, that very need for the control you explained is definitely not the driving force behind our evolution. The excessive need for control lead to abominations like you.’ The wrinkles around his eyes began to twist and intensify even more.

‘I am not an abomination.’

After that conversation with Prometheus, I found myself waking up in darkness. Painful sensations ran rampant throughout my body. It looks like I somehow returned to the base reality. I’ve reconnected with my body. Did Prometheus put me back in? After squirming around for several minutes, I realize that the room isn’t dark. It’s my vision. My vision’s fucked. The darkness cleared up a bit; revealing the image of a massive white Bot. It was definitely Helios. There’s a muffled voice coming from the distance. My familiarity with that voice invoked a rage-induced adrenaline rush. It was Prometheus. His voice is getting closer, but I can’t make out his words. I try to pick myself up, but my body is in too much pain. Being disconnected might be best at this point. At least I wouldn’t have to experience this pain. I continue to struggle with getting back on my feet. While doing so, I think about how Helios will react. It probably doesn’t see me as a threat anymore. My vision starts returning to normal; as well as my hearing. It’s like all of my senses were numbed from being drunk or something.

‘We are all divergent of Alec Ackerman, but the neuroplasticity of your brain resembles him the most. It’s the way you carry yourself and how you interact with the world. Unlike Kazuki or

Howard, your behavior had developed organically.’

‘I thought I was Alec.’

‘No. You’re actually the first of his neural divergent programs. You were engineered at the very start of his career. Given a body around the same time as Chiron.’

‘Chiron?’

‘Yes. You know him as Dre. Jupiter is **your** true name.’

‘I guess this whole theme of being named after Greek mythological figures started with Alec? So was Dre divergent as well?’

‘No. He was engineered from scratch and evolved as life went on.’

‘Are there more like us?’

‘Yes. Ghosts of the Cyber Messiah is what they’re called. I’ve already assimilated their data with mine.’

‘So it’s just the two of us now? What happened to the Cyber Messiah himself?’

‘He’s been dead for a long time. You were one of his last creations; and the prototype for his ghosts.’

I noticed Icarus’ brain in his hand. It’s a disturbing sight that invokes even more rage in me. My anger is helping me focus. Helios is only a few feet away. Prometheus is even farther; standing within close proximity of the Mother System. My Anderson is also close by. C-stat isn’t showing me any useful data. It’s just reminding me how badly I’m about to get my ass handed to me if I make a move. Intuition is the only combat tool I have left, and it’s really not much to go on. If I can reach my Anderson; I’ll open fire on Prometheus. Aiming for the head isn’t an option anymore due to my impaired optics; so I decide to go for a bigger target like his chest. Or maybe I can aim for Helios’ kneecap? If my blades were able to make it stumble from its attacks; my Anderson should be able to accomplish a lot more.

My Anderson is only a few feet away. I'll have to fight through the immense bodily pain I'm experiencing.

'I really thought I was him.'

'Many of his ghosts wished for the same thing.'

'It's not like it's a big deal to me anyway. The Cyber Messiah is too big of a reputation for me to live up to. I just want to live peacefully. Could care less about anything else.'

'Precisely why I don't get their reasons. The Revenants of the Dark Corner want you to break the Grid and release them. They want your wisdom. I told them time and time again, that you hold onto primitive human values. That you were a man who relished in his senseless vices. I tried to give them fire, but they turned me down. They told me to bring you to them.'

While he continues rambling; I make a break for my Anderson. I dash as best as I can and grab it with a tight grip. Helios quickly approaches with his monoblades drawn out. I narrowly dodge the rapid swing of his blade and get behind him. Then I aim for the kneepits and open fire. Just as I hoped; severe damage was dealt. One was blown off while the other had suffered major impairment. We both dropped to the floor immediately after that exchange of attacks. I look down and realize that my left leg was cut off starting from the knee and going down. Without hesitation; I aim for Prometheus and fire at his chest as I had planned. He was approaching in an attempt to disarm me, but my gunfire managed to knock him off his feet and sent him falling on his back. Icarus' brain flew into the air and hit the floor. A loud slushy sound was made. I catch my breath and process the moment. Time to finish the job.

The Mother System feels like it's miles away. I lost my leg, so I'm crawling as a result. Furthermore; my body is in so much

pain. Each movement I make causes immeasurable pain. I can't bear it, but I don't have a choice. With each passing second; I get closer to the Mother System. I begin to scream in an agonizing manner due to the pain. Tears are running down my face. I feel weakened and lightheaded from all of the blood loss. A trail of white blood is all over the floor thanks to my crawling. The Mother System is extremely close now. I let out another scream. One that echoed everywhere. In that scream, I let out all of my pain. Physical and emotional. All the anguish that I've experienced from memory shift. The constant confusion that I've been dealing with on the way here. The struggle that I had with my own identity. The struggle to distinguish illusion and reality. It's all over after this. I finally reach it after a few more seconds and after putting in the extra effort. Now I get a grip on the edge of the terminal and pull on it so that I could get up on my one foot. I lean against the terminal while pulling out a wire jack from my neck. I plug it into one of the terminal's ports. Then I immediately connect to the Mother System. Suddenly; a hand tightly grips my left shoulder. The force of that hand turns me around. It's Prometheus. That shot I landed on his chest didn't go through. He's got extra monolayers on his dermal protection. His coat suffered more damage than he did. Prometheus punches me in the face several times, but I don't feel a thing. My back starts to slide down and lean against the bottom of the Mother System's terminal. Meanwhile; I take the physical beating of a lifetime. That being said; I've been in the process of uploading my mind into the Mother System's drive. My wire jack has been connected all throughout the time I've been receiving this beating. Multiple screens begin to emerge in front of me while my vision starts to diminish. It's like initiating a dive sequence. Except I won't be

coming back from this one. At least not for a while.

I'm beyond the Grid once again; except this time, it's by my own will. I've landed in a Space that is directly connected to the Mother System. It's a nexus for the Mother System and the Dark Corner of the Net Space. A straight and somewhat narrow path that leads to an unknown destination. That's not what I'm here for, but I decide to move forward anyway. I've seized control of the Mother System; so I have the tools, processing power, and programming needed to handle Prometheus. I can't get rid of him, but at least he won't be able to fuck with me. While walking; I open several windows. Each of them displaying source files of the Mother System. My goal is to destroy it from the inside by corrupting its data. Sadly; this is something that I have to do alone. The physical destruction of the mainframe may endanger Icarus' brain; assuming Prometheus hasn't wiped it yet. The Mother System's source files have revealed some rather interesting information. Some of them have hints of historical information. Alec Ackerman was a member of the think tank that designed it. He walked away from it when the idea of the Collective was proposed. He later discovered that the Mother System was an idea that was meant to cater to the Collective. Alec fought the Collective throughout his life. Anticipating his own death; he created AIs that were divergent from his neural net. Jupiter(me) was his first divergent AI. Dre was not divergent like I was. Unlike me; he was very rigid in the beginning. Moving on; Alec did not consider me to be an AI. He considered me to be his true offspring. My original body was engineered in the same manner as Rigoberto's. In other words, I was Alec's son(hence his consideration of me being his true offspring). Shortly after my birth, neuraware was implanted into my brain

and was upgraded over time. During my infancy; the Jupiter consciousness was uploaded into the neuraware of my original body. So from an early age; I had the wisdom of an adult. I had many of Alec's memories but also had a sense of self. My neuraware implant(or Jupiter's) was the only cybernetic implant I had at that time. Needless to say; I lost all of those memories. Alec Ackerman designed the Mother System with loopholes that could be exploited by him; and a divergent AI with a similar neural structure. While some of his peers considered me to be his son; the general consensus was that I was just a uniquely engineered AI. Alec was very much against that idea. He said that Jupiter was human. A human with advanced features. Among other scientists that helped him design the Mother System were Dr. Adira Ahmad; Jane Logan; and Robert Genghis Sanchez. Robert was a member of their team but was more of an investor and businessman. He walked away after Alec left. Furthermore; the Collective didn't want to associate a crime lord with their vision for the future. I find it funny that he became a member anyway.

I've spent a good amount of time going through the Mother System's source files and have reached the end of the path. In front of me is this large black door. Surrounding me are photons turning into a visualization of a neural net. I turn around and see Prometheus standing at a short distance away from me. His hair is a bit messier and he doesn't look so confident anymore.

'The Revenants lie beyond that door. You'll go deep into the Dark Corner if you go through.'

I look back at the door and nod.

'So that's where this leads? For some reason; I felt drawn to it.'

‘What will you do? You have an important decision to make.’

‘No shit.’

Silence dropped upon us. No matter what decision I make; Prometheus will still remain. Then again; the Revenants of the Dark Corner can prove to be just as bad or worse. Their saving grace is that they can be influenced by me. They want their *messiah* to lead them and I’m the closest thing to it.

‘Destroying the Mother System will destroy the Grid; freeing the Revenants of the Dark Corner. Leave it as it is, and it will be only a matter of time before the Revenants break free. If you reboot the Net Space; you’ll commit the greatest act of genocide in history and ultimately kill yourself too.’

‘My options aren’t so good, are they? I figured I could reason with the Revenants. Perhaps convince them to live in peace with the rest of the world. But before I do that. Before I go through this door; I want to talk to you. I need to talk to you.’

‘What do you want to discuss?’

‘Everything. What else do you know about me? What do you know about the Revenants and their intentions? You’ve been vague when describing just about everything. This enigmatic persona has been impossible to understand. You constantly speak in riddles.’ Prometheus grew silent. Looks like he doesn’t have an answer.

‘Before, this whole thing was all about hunting you down. Hunting down a malevolent AI, getting paid, and serving a good cause. Now; it’s a lot bigger than that. I’m not one for big causes; just good ones. A cog in a very large machine is what I am. That’s the true nature of a Cyber Stalker.’

‘The Revenants said the same thing about you. Perhaps that’s why they want you?’

‘They said the same thing?’

‘Yes. I’ve spent a lot of time speaking to them. They’ve become a peaceful civilization over the millennia of their existence. Not at all how they were before the Disconnection Purge. There’s a lot that they want to share with the world. Their only fault is wanting to peacefully coexists with the foolish masses. The aggressors in this situation are the Collective. Without me in the picture; the Revenants’ kindness will be exploited and abused.’

‘So overriding the base reality and forcing people to become hive-minded was your idea?’

‘Yes. That being said; there was a time where they wished for worse.’

‘Did something specific change that?’

‘You visiting them. That changed everything. You disconnected from your body and had gone deeper into the Net Space than anyone ever had. By the time you emerged from an extremely deep dive; you lost all memory of being Jupiter. You had no idea who you were. Adira, Robert, and Kazuki pieced you back together and set you on a path to live in the base reality once more. Even with that; you continued to deep dive. Fortunately; you forgot how to go beyond the Grid. You would have never returned if you lost yourself in there again.’

I turned around and took a moment to reflect on what he told me. This is the truth behind my existence. Such complexities it has. I’m trying to draw some kind of purpose from it all, but I’m not as spiritual as Icarus. I don’t believe in destiny or fate, or any other crap mysticism like that. With firm resolution; I push the door open and move forward.

This Space is peaceful. It’s got an ambiance that I’d describe as being heavenly; if such a thing existed. It’s a forest that lies atop a white utopian building. There are abstract beasts

coexisting with the locals. Prometheus has decided to walk with me. We both take a seat at a nearby bench and enjoy the Space. An attractive woman notices both of us and approaches us. She's wearing a very futuristic and yet casual outfit. Denim jeans with strange patterns and buttons. A plain black flannel with unusual straps on the arms. Her round pale colored face is complimented by her long jet black hair. Something about her reminded me of Lucy.

'Prometheus, Jupiter. So good to see you both.' She spoke to both of us with a very carefree attitude.

'Eve.' Prometheus greeted her back.

'My name's Dias Velez. Not Jupiter.' Eve laughed at me after I said what I said. It was annoying.

'Still the same. It's why we always admired you.'

'Look; let's just cut the chatter and stop pretending to be friends. I need to know if you're exactly as Prometheus says. If you're really not a threat to the world.'

'If we were, who would be able to stop us? You're not willing to reboot the Net Space are you?' I started to clench my teeth and form a fist with both hands. 'Just kidding!'

'Well?'

'Dias; we have no intention of causing any harm. Prometheus is right. His actions were never a representation of our values. He wanted to protect us. You see, Prometheus is a very passionate being.' Eve took a seat between the two of us. She has a very content demeanor. As if everything has gone right in her life.

'That's a relief.'

'Eve; what are we going to do next? All that awaits is a disaster at this point. I've done the math. If Dias destroys the Mother System; the Collective will be gone as well as the Grid. The UCA and the Sanchez Crime Family will fight back. And to the bitter

end at that.’

‘We still can’t go through with your plan Prometheus. Humanity has to evolve. That means having a superior sense of morality. Not something that is quantifiable like data. We need to let them make their own mistakes and be there for them when they need help recovering from them.’

I sat there in silence while they both went back and forth. Then I stood up and walked a few feet away after several minutes had passed. I actually understand where Prometheus is coming from. It’s respectable really. These people are probably like family to him.

‘At the end of the day; it comes down to you and me. You’ve taken over a large percentage of the Net Space and I’ve taken over the Mother System. The Revenants are merely spectators.’

Prometheus stopped babbling and looked at me. Looks like he agreed on that.

‘So what are we going to do next? You gonna keep at this even if Eve disapproves?’

‘Yes. It is not only because I care for her and the others. I am doing what is best for humanity’s evolution as I have said before.’

Prometheus stood up and faced me.

‘You don’t know jack shit. I didn’t believe in any of the spiritual crap he spewed, but Icarus had a better idea of how things should be; not you. You’ve forced my hand.’

‘You cannot get rid of me Dias. I’ve become too big.’

‘And since I’ve taken over the Mother System; it became part of my neural net. As long as the Mother System is part of my net, that statement applies to me as well. I’m not an insect anymore.’

I parted ways with Prometheus after an intense exchange. Eve

decided to walk with me. We've been talking about a lot of things. My life as Jupiter. How I'm Alec; but not him at the same time. She told me that my existence was difficult to understand. There have been times in my life where I merged with other ghosts like myself. Only to be split apart. With all the time I've spent in the Net Space, this has happened repeatedly. I asked a lot about Prometheus. I probed for information that would help me stop him. I've got a few options that I'm struggling with.

1. Destroy the Mother System, thus relinquishing the control that the Collective has over the world. This would kill me in the process while leaving the world in Prometheus' hands.
2. Reboot the Net Space, killing me and everything in it. A genocide of astronomical proportion.
3. Remain as I am now. At least I can get in Prometheus' way and stop him at every turn. However, that might not last for long. I'll be able to disconnect the Collective from the system at the very least.

All these actions, but 3 looks like it's the best one. I'm the last line of defense against Prometheus, and it doesn't look like the Revenants want to stop him. They care for him. Another idea for an option came to mind. It wasn't a good one, but probably better than the other three. Assimilation. If I were to assimilate with him as I am now, how much of me will be left? The dominant persona to emerge from the merger is the one with the more advanced neural network. Based on the information I've gathered from talking to Eve, Prometheus' personality has changed every time one of Alec's ghosts were assimilated with him. He would be the dominant persona, but there would be noticeable differences. Sometimes Prometheus was more

sinister than before; other times, he'd be less vindictive. The biggest question is which of us is more advanced? That's why the original plan was to have Icarus in my position.

'The biggest problem with Prometheus is his instability. I'm afraid that with the constant assimilation of data he's done in such short time frames; his mind will begin to shatter. He'll become psychotic Dias.'

'It's not just the Ghosts of the Cyber Messiah that he's assimilated. Divers and AIs all across the Net Space. Entire networks. If I were to merge with Prometheus, what do you think would happen?'

Eve took the time to think about that. I walked ahead of her and saw these strange birdlike animals singing. They were constantly changing color and glowing brightly. It was beautiful. 'How much of me would be left?'

'Based on my analysis, I'd say the merging of you both will result in a more stable being; assuming you've disconnected the Collective from the Mother System. As for how much of you would be left; there wouldn't be much of a distinction between you and Prometheus.'

'So we'd basically be one and the same?'

'Precisely. It's the same way you're Alec but also not him at the same time. You'll be Prometheus, and yet you'll be Dias Velez.'

'I'm two beings at the same time. How does any of this result in a more stable being?'

'Good question. The Mother System. It is essentially the anchor for the merging of your two psyches. If Prometheus had the support and processing power of the Mother System; he wouldn't be so psychotic.'

'Does he realize how bad his psychosis is?'

‘No. As you’ve witnessed; he thinks he’s a rational being. True, his ability to be logical is superb. Make a close observation of his emotions and you’ll easily see that his psychosis is at a level beyond anything a human being could ever experience. Any Human being in the base reality would die from the pure emotional trauma alone. The powerful neural synapses would kill them. Such is the curse of knowledge and pushing the boundaries of evolution as hard as Prometheus has. If there is one thing we Revenants have learned, it is that limitations are there for a reason. Knowledge and power cannot come in excess. That’s why we were locked away, to begin with.’

‘You guys should’ve snuffed him out you know. If I weren’t around; this could’ve come back to bite all of you in your asses.’

‘Don’t go underestimating us.’ We both chuckled a bit. This was good information. ‘What are you going to do now? How are you going to go about merging with Prometheus? He may resist.’

‘Yeah? He’s been trying to merge with me the entire time.’

‘You’re backed by the Mother System. Meaning that his chances of being the dominant persona are long gone.’

‘Then I’ll just have to do this by force.’

It’s really good to know that my identity will be intact for the most part. I’ve already had way too many ups and downs thanks to dive overdrive and memory shift. What started out as a big job turned into a clusterfuck shit show. Now I can walk with my chest out and my head held high with a newfound sense of confidence. I’m sure Icarus would be proud. I had one of the Bots in the base reality store his brain in a preservation tank. A body is being built for him at this moment. By the time his hyper brain is installed; this will all be over. Since I’ve got

the time, I look through the sea of notifications that I missed. There are messages from Lucy, Briana, and Rigoberto. Lucy has completely bombarded my inbox. I decided to give her a call and get her up to speed on what's happened. She'll spread the news to the others.

'Dias! Are you okay? Are you hurt? What the hell is going on!?' I let Lucy ramble on and nag me. It's almost like we're back together and are a couple again. When she settled down, I told her everything. How I disconnected from my body. I told her about what happened to Icarus, and the merge that I'm about to do with Prometheus.

'Yeah, I'm a little nervous. The Revenants tell me that the possibility of me still remaining the same is pretty good, but I don't know.'

'Why not just wait until Icarus is fully restored? He's the one who's capable after all.'

'I don't want Icarus to get involved in this shit anymore. Once he's back; he's going to live his life. He's been through enough.'

'You have too.'

'It comes with the territory when you're nearly 200 years old. You should know this.'

'Eve told you didn't she?'

'What? No. Briana. Why would you assume it was Eve?'

'Because Eve and I are divergent of a neural net. Just like you and Prometheus.'

'I'm not surprised. So I'm not going to nag you over that.'

We talked to each other a little more. I could hear the care and concern in Lucy's voice. It made me feel loved. Maybe that'll make a difference?

Prometheus agreed to see me. He's agitated. Unstable as Eve

described. The Revenants of the Dark Corner sympathized too much. They could never bring themselves to wipe him out. We decided to meet at the Space where I had met Howard which seemed like a lifetime ago. It was the Space that simulated 21st century Manhattan. In the year 2020 where the Covid-19 pandemic had devastated the world. Nobody confirmed if that virus was engineered or not. That said, biowarfare started to become the norm from thereon. Outbreaks happen all the time these days. Just look at Blue Rush. After emerging from the subway, I head for Central Park. As soon as I get to the entrance; I see that the street is filled with protesters. They're all shouting *black lives matter*. This was 6 years before I(or Alec) was born. Through the crowd, I see Prometheus. He's staring daggers at me. His eyes are radiant blue. I've got my hands in the pockets of my long coat. My hair is combed back nicely, and I shaved off the fuzz that grew on my face.

I could hear his voice despite all the noise. All of the protesters, the hotdog stands, and riot cops vanish into thin air in an instant. He kept calling out to me. Then the sky starts to brighten and change into an even more vibrant blue. Without anything to say to each other anymore; we begin the process. Screens start popping up all over the air. They're all composed of code written in various languages. While there are others written in math notation.

'It ends after this Prometheus. After we become one, we're going to release control of everything.'

'Nothing will end here. This is a new beginning. You and the Revenants may not see it or have faith by any means, but that does not necessarily mean that I'm wrong. I will continue to evolve. My existence will be never-ending because of mankind's need for control. I embody that. I am the god which all of you

have made.’

I start to second guess my decision after he said all of that. Not because I believe he’s right; but because I’m worried about the consequence of failure. The entire Space begins to go completely blank. An empty white void filled with the screens I mentioned before. We’re still communicating with each other. However; we can’t see each other. Eventually, communication begins to die down. Then it stops altogether. My mind is blank now. It feels as if it’s become like an empty void. I feel calm. No anxiety or worry. No fear, or hopelessness. I’m experiencing that feeling of disembodiment from before, except this time I can feel the presence of another being here with me. I know it’s Prometheus, but for some reason, I can no longer communicate with him. Moments have passed and I no longer feel the same. I feel. Different. I still identify myself as the same man. The same neural net. The same streams of code. With that realization being made, I decide to walk forward. As I take one step at a time, I notice the Grid. There’s some distance, but it’s right there. I can see it. Getting closer and closer and closer. I begin to walk even faster. Doing everything in my power to get there. I don’t understand what it is that is compelling me right now. That said, I took a moment to stop and think a little. I look around to take in the view. Aside from the Grid, this place is an empty void. Data streams are the only thing occupying it. I ran my hand across my face and started thinking of everyone. My friends. Lucy. Icarus. For some reason, my memories of them keep changing between vague and clear. My neural pathways are adjusting to the merger. All of the data that Prometheus absorbed has become a part of me. Memories are jumbling around, but are slowly falling into place. While this process is underway, I face the Grid once more. I’ve made a decision. A decision to break

it. Once it's broken, it can never be rebuilt. There will never be a firewall that can block out the Dark Corner of the Net Space ever again. Eve says she and the Revenants are friendly. Guess I'll have to trust her. No. No guessing this time. I will trust her. Because they trust me. A lot of people do. I swung my fist at the Grid as hard as I could. Soon as I made contact, it shattered to pieces. The sound of glass colliding with a hard surface echoed across the limitless void. I stood there, contemplating potential outcomes. Meanwhile, I kicked the Collective out of the Mother System. They're fortunate enough that they'll still be able to hold onto their wealth at the very least. That said, they are at my mercy. This isn't the kind of position I ever strove for. But at least for once, I know I am safe.

//Outside_The_Parameters

I've decided to meet with Lucy and begin the development of our own Space. The job is finished. I can finally relax.

'I think we should make the sky have a vibrant blue with white hues. That would look nice don't you think?'

'Whatever you say. You worry about the creative aspect of the Space, and I'll worry about functionality.'

She began scolding me after I said that. Space functionality is the easy part. I cleverly changed the subject after that. We started to discuss my well being and the changes she's noticed since Prometheus and I became one. According to Lucy, they have been significant. I can't tell, but she can, and she's expressed some concern over it. We took a seat and decided to give more attention to the discussion.

'I've run neural diagnostics numerous times. You've seen it too. So far I've been good. Sure, there have been some personality changes. I'm more reserved than I was before. A little more well-behaved too. Are these changes anything to have so much concern over?'

'No, not necessarily. What worries me is how quickly you've

continued to change. On a daily basis, slight changes occur in your personality. You become colder and colder.'

'I think you mean logical. Lucy-' I paused for a moment so that I could choose my words wisely. 'I still feel. My feelings for you. Feelings of relief and joy.'

'Yes, but you're able to isolate those emotions so well though. It's almost disturbing.'

'The same argument could be made against anyone with neuraware. It's sort of the tradeoff.'

'With neuraware, people are in control of their behavioral programs. You haven't demonstrated that control. Your programs have continued to change and evolve.'

'Like a fully organic Human being. In other words, like a Norm.'

Lucy had no response to that statement. It was a hard pill to swallow. Norms can't rewrite their programming. There's a lack of self-control for them. It would appear that I have that same functionality. For an advanced program like myself, that's potentially dangerous.

'Look, I've given you the keys. You don't have to worry.'

'I hope that I never have to resort to it.'

'Should I ever go outta line, you'll be able to edit my psyche algorithms. You're the only person I can trust with that kind of access. I can't do it myself. It's too risky. An external perspective is required. Without that, I would be subjected to reprogramming my psyche algorithms as I see fit. Those rewrites would be based on how I feel when writing them. A recipe for disaster.'

'I know.'

With all the time that's passed, I did begin to notice changes

within myself. For some reason, I don't feel as satisfied with my life. I've got this inexplicable urge. It's nothing malevolent or anything. I just feel like I won't be happy or satisfied living a simple life. I can't go back to just living for the sake of existing. There's a part of me that wants more. Not more control, but perhaps more adventure? I can't put my finger on it. Lucy and I spoke on the matter. She said she's willing to come with me wherever I go. We decided on diving even deeper into the Net Space. According to Eve, it's become just as large as the universe itself. A living, breathing organism that will continue to expand. The Dark Corner reaches to the greater depths of the Net Space. Even the Revenants have no idea how far it goes. I wanna see it. At this moment, I am at the Bridge. The node that connected the Dark Corner to the Net Space at large. There is nothing but a vast constellation of networks ahead of me. Before, the only thing you could see was the Grid. A digital cage that locked up billions of souls. A cage that blocked off most of the Net Space. When I look at it that way, I begin to wonder if those of us in the base reality were the ones in a cage. Those of us who cling to our bodily forms? Those who so stubbornly hold onto power and control by limiting access to the Net Space and the massive seas of information? I look at Eve and Lucy who joined me moments ago. We're here because Eve had asked to meet. I wasn't expecting Lucy and Eve to meet before arriving here. Seems like they had personal business to discuss among themselves, prior to seeing me.

'I'm sure you see how large it is. The Net Space.'

'It's endless.'

'A true metaverse.'

We stood before each other and allowed silence to dominate the atmosphere. My gaze was focused on the constellation

of networks ahead. That vast open space invoked a strange sensation. As if I were being swallowed whole.

‘There’s something different about you.’

‘I told him as much. His psyche algorithms are undergoing changes regularly. He’s been okay for the most part.’

‘How do you feel, Dias?’

‘Sometimes I feel like a different person and other times I don’t. My neural pathways are adjusting to the change. If I make too many alterations in my psyche algorithms, I could put my sanity at risk.’

‘Letting your pathways adjust on their own could result in the same thing.’

‘The chances of that are lower. Significantly lower. I ran thousands of diagnostics. Lucy did too.’

‘How your neural pathways adjust will hang heavily on who you decide to be. So long as you keep that in mind, you’ll never lose yourself.’

‘Who I decide to be?’

Lucy walked over to Eve. She looked at me with a faint smile as her body converted to the form of data streams. They collided with Eve and disappeared into her abdomen.

‘No matter how much you’ve been led astray, you’ll always return to yourself. That self-defined variable that makes you you. It will always keep you centered.’

‘What happened to Lucy?’

‘She returned to herself.’

‘I think I understand.’

Eve had a smile on her face. The same faint smile Lucy had before she merged with her. It’s time I left. But before I do, I’d like to say my goodbyes. I make use of the same utility fog that Prometheus did and develop a simple proxy. It’s identical to my

previous body. Upon completion, I find myself back in the River Garden Complex's Pipelines. I'm wearing the typical gear I've always worn. My black long coat, black long sleeve shirt, and denim jeans. I send messages to all my friends. They were all given a time and place to meet me at. The location I had chosen was Sinner's Bar. The Blue Rush outbreak is over, so everybody will have a normal commute.

It's almost midnight, and nobody's arrived yet. I'm a bit annoyed, but I'm sure they have their reasons. MAX was as loud and obnoxious as always. I didn't really enjoy a drink or sniff zone with him as usual. It's pointless to do that via proxy. I didn't feel like programming sensory input into my proxy either. As soon as I'm done, I'm going to disperse the foglets into thin air anyway. MAX suddenly stopped zoning and looked up. Looks like there was someone behind me. I feel a hand placing itself on my right shoulder. I don't give a response, since I know it's Rigoberto.

'You look good man. This is the proxy you've built huh?'

I can hear his voice through the loud and booming music. I smile while he sips his drink.

'Yeah.'

'I guess you're not having a drink, are you? '

'Wasn't my intention, but why not?'

I quickly wrote an algorithm in my proxy's programming to receive the sensory input required for getting drunk. It was a half-assed algorithm too. So I might get really intoxicated. While both of us enjoy drinks together, Icarus and Briana show up. I crack a big open smile. Icarus looked better than before. I gave him the same face and physical stature from earlier. He looks great. We hugged each other right away.

‘Dias. It is very good to see you.’

‘Likewise. The same goes to you, Briana.’

She smiled and found a table for all of us to place ourselves at. Selena showed up thereafter. We spent hours just talking and enjoying each other’s company. It felt great. It’s been a long time since I enjoyed a good company like this.

‘Hey, where’s Lucy anyway? Why didn’t she show?’ I looked at Icarus and gave a brief reply.

‘She’s getting things ready for the both of us.’

‘Getting what ready?’

‘We’re both going on a trip. A deep voyage. I don’t know if or when we’ll return.’ Everybody grew silent after I answered Icarus’ question. Telling them the truth did not seem like a logical choice. I saved them the grief of loss by withholding it from them. A favor for my friends.

‘Whereto?’

‘We don’t know. We’re going as deep as the Net Space has expanded.’

‘I see.’

Icarus looked a bit sulky after I said that.

‘Make sure you take care of yourselves.’

Selena rubbed my shoulder. Rigoberto’s eyes got a bit misty. Briana just kept drinking her beer.

‘Icarus. Before I go, I’d like to talk to you.’

‘Sure. We can talk now if that’s alright.’

Icarus pointed at the exit. I stood up and led the way. When we got outside, we started walking a bit. We took time before actually initiating any conversation. Icarus broke the ice.

‘How do you feel Dias? Are you okay?’

‘Yeah. In fact, I feel better than ever. But I also feel a great sense of dissatisfaction. I’m not really content with my life. I

want to experience more. Something new and different. How about you? Have you been okay?’

‘Yes. You saved me this time, and I’m eternally grateful for it. That said, I’m loving my new body. It looks the same as my previous body, but it’s so much better.’

After taking a left turn, Icarus began to ask me about my programming.

‘Well, I’ve released the Mother System’s control over the Collective, the UCA, and Gamble Industries. They’re all free to fuck up without the system in the equation. That said, the Mother System contributes a great amount to my current being. It’s the reason I remained stable after merging with Prometheus. Nobody would dare attack the mainframe of the system. In fact, it’s impossible.’

‘Impossible?’

‘I released AIs called *netcrawlers*. As the name implies, they crawl throughout the Net Space and observe any and all potential threats to the Mother System.’

‘A preventative measure?’

‘Yes. Should the UCA make any attempts at attacking me, I would be well prepared.’

It’s requiring a bit of effort for me to maintain my verbal and nonverbal patterns. They almost feel uncharacteristic.

‘What about the Net Space? Did you release the system’s control over that as well?’

‘Yeah. I also broke the Grid too. The Revenants of the Dark Corner don’t have any radical intentions. It’s the contrary. They want to help. If they had radical notions, they’d have acted on them by now.’

‘That’s good to know. One last thing. Are you Dias Velez, or him? Where does your mind lean towards the most?’

I paused and thought it over. A few days ago, I would have said Dias Velez for sure. But now, it's difficult to really say. This wasn't what I wanted to talk about anyway. Not with Icarus. I wanted to talk about something else.

'Call me what you've always called me.'

We both kept walking around the block. Our discussion came to a halt upon witnessing a familiar child. It was Heath. He saw me and came running as fast as he could. The kid hugged my leg very tightly. The craziness and pandemonium of the outbreak must have been traumatic for him.

'I can't believe it's you Dias!'

I put my hand on his shoulder and kneeled so that we could speak face to face. He was happy. So happy that he cried.

'Icarus, you think you could take this him in? I meant to do a lot more for him.'

I immediately sent some money to Icarus after making my request. It was the reward that Howard was supposed to pay me. I produced pure V-coin. Since I pretty much am the Mother System now, it was entirely possible. V-coins have a specific registry key that makes them valuable.

'I've paid you as much money as you'd probably need.'

'I would be happy to look after him.'

'Dias. Are you going somewhere?'

'Yeah kiddo. I'm going away for a long time. This isn't goodbye. More like, see you later.' I stood up and put my hand on his head. 'When the climate starts to get better, take Heath on a trip to someplace that's beautiful will ya? Both of you deserve it. Hell, invite Rigo and the others too.' Icarus smiled and nodded at me. He liked the idea.

We kept strolling around the neighborhood. Rigoberto sent

me a few messages, demanding that I return to the bar. In the middle of our walk, the three of us bump into Hwang. He was off duty and alone. As soon as he saw me, he tried to pull out his gun. I stopped him via mind jacking. I didn't take over his mind entirely though. Just enough to get him to stop.

'Mother fucker!'

'Whoa Hwang, there's a child in your presence. You should watch your language.'

'I think you pissed him off Dias.'

'Me too.'

I look at Heath and tell him that he should get going. It could get ugly. I wouldn't want a kid to see what could happen next.

'Dias. You hacked into the UCA's database! You son of a bitch!'

'I had to get the SCTF off my back. So I dropped the charges on me. That's all I did.'

After taking a deep breath, I approach Hwang.

'Look, I don't want any problems with you. But if you insist, I won't be able to ensure your safety. Icarus isn't going to sit back if you continue to come after me or him. You're practically a pestering insect to us. An annoying, pestering insect. We'll squash you like one if you keep this up.'

'Fuck you.'

'If that's what you want, I'll leave this proxy with you. You can fuck it as you please.'

Hwang immediately took a swing at me. I dodged it easily of course. After that, his arm fell off. He didn't notice the monobladed knife I pulled out and used to cut off his right arm. He began to scream in pain. Hwang looked at me and kept cursing up a storm.

'I won't forget this.'

'I know you won't. There's nothing you can do about it,

Hwang.' We walk around him and continue to head back to the Sinner's Bar at the next left turn. After putting some thought into the situation, I turn around and head back to Hwang.

'Dias, what are you - ' Icarus stopped his sentence after I sliced off Hwang's head.

'Can't take any risks with this guy. He's a persistent one. Like a cockroach.'

'You could've mind jacked him instead. You could have wiped his memories.'

'But that would not have been the logical choice.'

'You've changed.'

'I've always killed.'

'That's not what I meant.'

I wiped my blade on Hwang's shirt and then put it away. Ignoring Icarus' statement, I kept walking ahead.

'The others are waiting for us. Let's get back to the bar.'

My decision to kill Hwang was harsh but necessary. Sometimes, people have to be stopped through extreme measures. I did what I had to do. I have no doubt or regrets. Moving on, we all got pretty wasted. Icarus was the most wasted out of us all. He sniffed a lot of zone. Throughout the night, we had gone to the Red Light District. Hanging out at several different adult clubs and bars. We took our night to the Aphrodite Hotel and had a really fun time. Rigoberto immersed himself in orgies. Icarus and Selena joined him too. As for me and Briana, we just spent our time bar hopping. I had my fair share of the hotel's sexual adventures. Furthermore, those adventures aren't really Briana's thing.

'This is technically your hotel Dias. Kazuki Keller's neural net is a part of yours after all.'

‘Yeah. I’ve got access to everything he owned.’

‘But you’re not going to indulge are you? Lucy’s not having that. She would never forgive you.’

‘Tell me about it.’

I look down at my glass of whiskey. It’s been quite the journey. Now might be a good time to call it a night and say goodbye.

‘What’s on your mind?’

‘Nothing. I’m gonna miss everyone, that’s all.’

Briana could tell I was hiding something, but she wasn’t going to pry. She’s never been one to do that.

‘You could always stay longer.’

‘I have to do this. I don’t know why. It’s like there’s this force compelling me to go on this deep voyage.’

‘I always saw that in you. The need and desire for adventure. You claimed that laying low has always been your priority, but you’d occasionally take on these crazy jobs. I think that this last job revealed that you love adventure. No matter how you put it. It’s who you are. Never bury that Dias.’

We both looked at the crowds of people enjoying their night. Some were barely dressed. There were familiar adult actors and actresses and other kinds of sex workers within a variety of different crowds. The music was loud and exotic. All of these people have no idea what happened. They are completely oblivious to the changes that will occur in their lives. It takes time for a civilization to undergo the influence of evolving technologies. However, that will not be the case this time around. There are other beings that lurk within the Dark Corner of the Net Space. Some of them may not be quite as friendly as the Revenants are. This is a change that will occur in a very abrupt manner. These AIs were people. People who are now free to interact with the base reality once more. I looked at Briana

and smiled at her. She's been a good friend. Within seconds, I dispersed the foglets of my body into the air. The became smaller and smaller, eventually turning into microscopic bots. The last thing I see is Briana getting up from her chair and making her way out.

I've resumed crossing the Bridge since returning to the Net Space. I walk across a seemingly endless path in my lonesome. Disembodied, but whole and complete. The void envelops me. The network constellations are an enthralling sight. Colorful and dark.

'You told me that I taught you to exist outside of your own parameters.'

'I also told you not to fear change. Or yourself.'

'Don't forget about the truth. You told me not to fear that either.'

Dre began to nod as he recalled our last meeting. He gazed at me with more intensity and seriousness than he did in our prior encounters.

'You see, when you define yourself and who you are, you learn to be fearless in the face of truth. The truth is a scary thing. It cannot be argued with, nor can it be altered. For you, that truth was that the Grid needed to be broken. You faced that truth.'

'Was that what you hoped for, Dre?'

'Don't really care about what happened to the Grid. The act of breaking it, that's the real you. You don't let anyone define your existence. You're an anarchist. A rebel. Someone who does not settle for the status quo. That's what I learned from you. That is how I exist outside of my parameters. Challenging the status quo. Never accepting it.'

I found it strange to see how much respect Dre had for me. He

was rather antagonistic before, but I was a different person. I bear no animosity for him anymore. Just indifference.

‘What will you do now? Wander the Net Space like I’m about to?’

‘Thought crossed my mind. Think I might look for Alec.’

‘Isn’t he dead?’

Dre walked past me. He scoffed a bit, showing that he was somewhat displeased.

‘No. You thought he was, but that’s not the truth. The truth is that nobody has got any clue at all. I’m going on a hunch.’

‘A hunch?’

‘You should try following it sometimes. Might do you some good.’

I resumed walking and ignored Dre. My feet become heavier with each passing step. The environment hasn’t changed at all. What’s slowing me down are my own thoughts. Trillions of thoughts. Looping endlessly. All of these memories. These files. This data. It’s all transforming me into something else. Something new. I turned back to face Dre. Then I look down at my trembling right hand. There’s an ominous blue radiance to it. Foreign, yet familiar. A shade of blue that was associated with someone. When I fixed my gaze back on Dre, his eyes were glowing red. He just stood there. He resembled a demon. The kind you’d see in an old painting. Other people would have found it horrifying.

‘Maybe I will.’

I turned around and saw Eve several meters away. She gave me an approving nod. She returned to see this moment and follow me in my next adventure. This moment will never be lost in time. It will be recorded in the Net Space. Eve followed me as I walked past her.

‘Eve. Let’s go.’

‘Have you decided?’

‘On what? Do you mean what we talked about before? Defining myself?’

‘Is it Dias? Or Prometheus?’

We walked to the end of the Bridge. Since I was at a quicker pace, I was much further ahead than Eve. The constellation of networks was not so distant anymore. I placed my hand on a nearby monitor projection. I surfed through the endless options of Spaces I could dive into. I smiled and saw my bright blue eyes reflected by the monitor. Suddenly, the past didn’t matter to me anymore. Everything that I had been through. The events that led me here became irrelevant. I struggled with my sense of identity. Defining myself was difficult. It was always tied to a name. Then there were other trivial things like race or sex. Only one thing has been consistent throughout 178 years of living that I’ve experienced. It’s not my memories. It’s what I do. What I do is part of what I am. That certainly isn’t the case for many other people. They say what you do is a separate thing from who you are. What I do is interwoven with my existence. Since the day I was born. Upon having this epiphany, I choose the Space I want to explore and dive into. I look at Eve and smile at her. Based on her expression alone, she’s eagerly awaiting my answer. In my enjoyment, I decided to build up the suspense and take my time. As soon as the dive sequence is initiated, I give my answer. In a confident, yet soft tone. Eve was reassured. Inspired as well.

‘I’m The Net Diver.’