

SLOGANS
THE END OF SYMPATHY

MARK BURGESS

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Author's note

This novel was written when I was Professor of System Administration, at the University College in Oslo, as an exploration of how we govern complex systems of humans and machines. Some of the quoted conversations and news flashes are transcribed verbatim from actual conversations I overheard while travelling. Some things you just couldn't make up. Although the book was never meant as a serious prediction of our future society, more than a few aspects of the story have come to pass, and the world seems to be rushing ever faster towards a separatist, information-technology-fuelled tribalism. I hope readers may still find the book enjoyable and thought provoking.

-MB, 2017

TRANSCRIPT OF BUS SECURITY CAMERA AUDIO.
RECORDED MARCH 2002, SOMEWHERE BETWEEN HEATHROW AND
GATWICK AIRPORTS, ENGLAND, UK.

"Yeah hello?"

"You're awake then? What's the matter?"

"Oh.

"Eh. . .

"Look. . .

"I can hear that!"

"Well, you're obviously you're in one of your states.

"Just wait. . .

*"Well, I'm on the bus coming from London. It's packed. Some kind of
bloody Christian outing by the looks of it.*

"Oh god. What?"

"So you're home?"

"Brighton.

*"In about an hour, if this completely ridiculous driver gets his act to-
gether. The fucking bus is going at a snail's pace.*

"What? You must be joking?"

"That's about the stupidest thing I've ever heard.

"Look it's very very crowded on the bus and I am in no mood for your whining, little one.

"Well just pull yourself together. Don't fall part on me while I'm on the fucking bus.

"So?

"Look. What's the matter? Why are you crying?

"Stop it.

"What is it now?

"Oh, Jesus. Here we go. . .

"Yes. . .

"Yes. . .I know. I know. Yes.

"Well, what do you expect?

"You get yourself into these situations all by yourself. You've got no one to blame except yourself.

"No, it's you.

"It's you.

"Stop trying to put the blame onto other people, for god's sake. You know it's you. You are totally pathetic in that kind of situation. Yes. . . You do. . .

"Of course he doesn't like you. Who would when you go on like this?

"Look sit down and have a glass of wine and pop a pill or something. You are just making it worse for yourself by crying on and on like this.

"Well why would anyone be interested in you?

"No, you have got to starting using that little sponge you call a brain. Consider it, that's why the good Lord gave it to us, you know?

"Oh fuck. You have got to get over this. You have GOT. To GET. OVER. THIS.

"No.

"No.

"No.

"No, you see, there you go again, making excuses for yourself. Now I say to myself. Philip, you must be out of your mind to be answering the phone to this completely mad person. You have got to make her take responsibility for her own actions. You have to got to teach her to take responsibility for herself.

"No, Jonathan hates you too.

"He won't have anything to do with you, so you might as well forget that.

"Jonathan can't stand you, because you are always snivelling.

"Look. Stop snivelling. You're a perfect wretch! Why don't you go down to the corner shop and get yourself a bottle of whiskey or some other goddamn liquor, the cheaper the better. . .and just drink yourself unconscious. Do the world a favour. Then none of us will have to listen to your unbelievably pathetic whining.

"Good!

"Shut up! Listen to yourself. Why would anyone care?"

"Look you are embarrassing me. This is not a conversation that I want to have right now.

"No.

"No, you can't.

"Good, that's better.

"Yes.

"Yes.

"About an hour. And no, I'm not going to call you later, so don't sit there expecting me to be there for you.. I am fucking dying for the bog and it stinks in there. You wouldn't believe. You'd think they'd clean the thing in a public place.

"Get yourself out of the house. Get a fucking life..

"Yes.

"Yes.

"Yes now go away!"

"Good. Love you too."

Prologue

Oslo, 2004

Poverty, suspicion and then violence: three wretched bed-fellows that stalk us, waiting to split society open, as if with an axe to the skull. It is a direct affront to civilization.

Damn the politicians for their incompetence!

Looking out across the darkness of Birkelunden Park, old Arne's shadow trembles in the doorway, like an earthquake with the palsy. The evening is not cold, not even here at the breezy entrance to the vestibule; it's mostly his nerves—that and the spectre of a pestilence, invading his neighbourhood.

Behind him, the church steeple thrusts up into a darkened sky, groping for a realm of higher grace, one that is immune to these stains on civic decency. It makes for a chilling contrast to see this perversion of civil society so close to hallowed ground, so close to the safety of home.

His gaze follows the two down-and-outs, pushing their plastic newspaper cart, leaden with shopping bags. Where did they steal that? And what's in those bags? Look at them! They disgust him. Bickering like a couple of ten year olds, probably over whatever money they have managed to extort from decent folk, they mumble with that distant and petulant slur of persistent substance abuse.

The contrast disturbs all possible sensibility. The quiet beauty of the park with its empty bandstand and simple drinking fountain, the austerity of the old trees, the tidiness of the bushes and grass: they are all symbols of Man's great achievement: the refrain from opportunistic violence, participation in the order of self-discipline towards the common good: Civil Society. It is demeaned by this vulgar show. These people are drop-outs by choice. Any man can have a job, if he wants one.

Arne views these events from across the threshold, drawn by the tram-lines,

sensing that something is about to happen. The world is falling apart on nights like this, but they tell him he is just a foolish old man, fearful of shadows and of change. The sceptics should be here now to see this. Tonight, for once, his fears are confirmed.

An immigrant man, with greying hair, probably of Pakistani origin, approaches the couple from the nearby tram station. He's quite well dressed. At least one can say that about these immigrants.

"Hey there, chief," says the dark-skinned man to the couple.

At first they ignore him, but the man persists in his salutation. They look at him sullenly, more concerned with whining to each other than bothering with him. The woman is trying to get the man to give her something—looks like a key from a big key ring, but he is like a sulky child. They are his keys. They are important to him. He is not going to give them up easily. He must be thirty but he looks forty-five. They are down-and-out. They are like children.

"So, chief. Are you some sort of a security chief? What you got all those keys for?"

The man's scruffy belt bulges under his fleece jacket with the huge key ring; it has dozens of keys on it. It shines in comparison to his filthy, old clothes, and pasty-grey, unshaven face, or what little of it shows from behind his shoulder-length shaggy hair. At the mention of the keys, he looks up.

"What's it to you?"

The keys are probably just flea-market memorabilia; collecting them is likely what passes for a hobby for the hobo, but that possibility seems to escape their provocateur. He is haunted by the daemons of an experience that is not available to the onlookers. The Paki comes closer. He is smartly dressed in suit trousers with a white shirt. He looks nervous or agitated, although it is difficult to tell from this distance—and you can never tell what the hell these foreigners are thinking

"What do you need all those keys for?" he asks.

The man shrugs. If his face were not so deadened with years of abuse, one might have seen a quizzical expression on it. "They're just keys."

"Keys, eh? What does someone like you need so many keys for?"

The down-and-out glares at him and pushes the woman aside, as if to leave. He does not care to reply to the man. His consciousness of the situation has already dissolved into the numbness of his intoxication. There is neither understanding of the question nor emotional engagement in the encounter.

The dark man's querying expression changes abruptly to one of accusation. "If you come anywhere near my home, I'll bloody kill you!"

The threat of this outburst merits a glance, at least. "What???" Down-and-out steps back a step in surprise.

The well-dressed refugee comes closer, posed more threateningly. "I'm not afraid of you!" he shouts, suddenly angry for no reason and clearly lying. He pulls his shirt up, revealing a hammer stuffed into his trousers. "See this? You're a bloody drug addict! My apartment has been broken into four times! If you come back again, I'll get you! I'm not afraid."

"Fuck off! Just ignore him," says the woman, repacking her plastic bags for no apparent reason.

He takes the hammer out of his trousers. "You're simple! You're bloody simple!" the man shouts. "I'll get you if you come near my family!"

"They're keys," the man replies. "I'll kill you with . . . a single. . ."

He is a ghostly pale man in filthy clothes. He can hardly stand up, let alone muster a punch.

"Can't you just leave us alone?" the woman sneers.

"He's a bloody drug addict!" cries the dark-skinned man, as if in confirmation. He looks around him as if to involve onlookers and seek their confirmation. He has pulled out the hammer now and is gesticulating with it dangerously.

"What's it to you?"

Arne's heart is beating quickly now. He has not seen a violent incident in this city – not even in his home country – since his days doing his national service. He has never seen anyone brandish a weapon.

The two down-and-outs shuffle slightly backwards into the darkness of the park, trying not to cause a scene, but the man has already attracted the attention of the people on the street. This is a busy residential area where people go to bars and cafes. Even in this laissez-faire country people would notice something like this.

A figure in his field of vision is talking into his mobile.

So lashes the tail of diabolical intervention. Two figures emerge from the cover of night; they are large and their heads are shaven. Their clothing is disrespectfully contrary to fashion or style, jackets tied around their waists and nothing but T-shirts and faded jeans to cover them. One of them has a beer towel sewn on to his jeans as if for corporate sponsorship. They wear the German swastika tattooed onto their bare arms. They are moving rapidly, purposefully, almost running, as though responding to a fire. They are carrying bottles of beer on the streets. That is illegal at best, Arne thinks.

Without introduction, challenge or warning, the leader shouts: "You fucking wop!", and strikes the Pakistani over the head with his bottle. The man has not seen them coming. He falls to the ground bleeding and the skinhead kicks him for good measure, though it hardly seems relevant. He is barely moving. "Fuck off home!" the leader shouts, bending over him, as if the man is in a fit state to understand his words. "Fucking wop!" His sidekick imitates his brutish pose, both of the standing over what increasingly resembles a corpse.

People waiting for the tram are beginning to look nervous, woken by the act. They are wondering whether they should intervene or call the police or just get out of there. This lightning bolt of obscenity has paralyzed them. They cannot quite believe this is here in their world. Where did these figures come from? How did this situation escalate so quickly from ignorable poverty to threatening violence?

Arne reels. My god, he thinks, all that he holds dear! Everything he has, everything that matters—it could all be broken, twisted and smashed in a single instant of primitive reflex. This is terror of the worst kind! Against ourselves!

He falls back into the entrance of the church, wondering whether the youngsters talking into the mobiles called the police or whether they called the attackers. Tremors dominate his thoughts, as his own fragility is so brutally and graphically explained to him.

They are out there: the homeless, the drug addicts, the simple, the fearful, the ones who do know how to fit in, the ones who are expelled without tolerance. They are lurking in the sidelines, waiting to explode; a ticking time bomb, threatening the very fabric of society. An enemy within.

Arne is white and breathless now. They infiltrate our hallowed places, the very symbols of our civilization! They are where we least expect them to be, he gibbers in his mind. They brew the fear that makes us hate, the fear that leads to addiction, to that same poverty of thought, and to violence itself. How far has Man come in our world, only to be stopped by this?

What is the point of it all, if such a wound can bleed our very security?

Crystallizing in his panic, he watches the scene coldly, with a bitter fear, without interfering, without helping, without speaking up, without acting on his distress, without breathing or caring enough to act, without changing society or resolving to make it a better place. Instead, his emotion turns to hate and he turns inward. The righteous will prevail without his intervention.

I. THE LIGHTHOUSE AND THE SIRENS' SONG

SOME YEARS LATER...

1

Sara Vibeke Stensrud (best known to her friends as Vibe) marvels at the little town from the train station, as she fumbles a heavy backpack onto her skinny frame. She takes pause, only for a second, to appreciate the change in surroundings. For weeks, she has been stuck in an office, playing with sterile computer programs; now here, with the wind on her face and the sun in her eyes, she can finally sense that she is part of the world.

This is a real place.

Very cool indeed. It's like finding a world, in VR, where things are going on even though you are not there to see them. People actually live here and stuff changes by itself; and now, she gets to sample the delights, interact with the characters.

The little station is idyllic, even friendly; newly painted railings show an attention to detail and a caring warmth, despite the icy mountain wind. She texts a quick message to Bea, even as she fumbles with her sack, to say "Duh!" and snaps a picture of the scene with her glasses, sending it along with the message.

Like agony aunts, doom-saying inevitable plastic surgery, they have been betting on what the little town would look like after its shoe-shine. Face it, Bea's roots were once pulled out of countryside and are now replanted in deepest Urbania; given a podium, she can talk for, well minutes actually, describing the mausoleums of badly-painted wooden houses, prefabricated concrete boxes and other delights to be found out here. Norway might be known for its natural beauty, but not for its architectural prowess.

In a moment, the train behind her will pull away and Vibe will be on her own, maybe even for the next few days. So friendly is good. It looks even a little homey, but it doesn't quite feel like home. She smiles playfully and texts Bea: "In love, will stay here and raise kids," and she adds a wink.

Are we ready?

All right then.

The sun's halting disc beams down from autumn cobalt. Flags flutter like mainsails, catching a rush of icicles streaming off the mountain. The shuttle-train has been shielding her from it so far, but in an instant the deceptive clemency will show its fangs, ever ready to suck the warmth from the unwary. Time to get moving before she catches her death.

She removes her glasses—a little vanity that she enjoys: flirting with eye-

wear in public places. No use for them on the mountain perhaps, but still good to have. Then her mobile beeps a message back at her. It's from Bea. It says "Duh!" and has a smile! Vibe grins and rolls her eyes at her own silliness.

Bury my mobile! she smiles to herself. *Anyway, here we are, ready to make the trek into the mountains. Off we go.*

Ambivalence simmers. She has not exactly become flavour of the month for deciding to come out here. "Go!" "Don't go!" they said. What was that all about? For her, the trip is part nostalgia, partly survival, and partly a sense of adventure, rekindled. And, of course, there was one thing that clinched it.

But we won't talk about that one for now. . .

She pulls up a local map on her wristband and checks directions. She'll probably have to get a taxi from here to the start of the path up the mountain. Too far to walk all the way.

Besides there'll be enough walking in the next few days to give Ghandi blisters. . .

Vibe flicks through some menus with her thumb and dials the number of the team leader. The charmingly way-too-slow voice at the other end is clearly a machine, or else Mrs. Laurent has been doing drugs. "Hello, Mrs. Laurent? This is Sara Stensrud. Just letting you know that I have arrived at the train station and should be with you tomorrow. I'll call again from the cabin this evening."

Vibe pulls her backpack straps tighter and extricates her long, mousy ponytail from the rigging. She heads to the station exit.

Her wrist signals again and her hand has palmed the strap before she realizes that she has no self-control. The message is a form from the research council, for her travel expenses. Useful, but late. Famous government bureaucracy — as timely as a tortoise on stilts. It should pretty much fill itself out, so she just flicks through, accepting its terms. Approval from her advisor is already there; there will have to be confirmation from Brussels before she can start the spending. . . blablabla. Fine. It's better than nothing. She squeezes 'send' and does not wait for confirmation before flipping over to send a quick one-liner to her advisor.

Then something odd. The display freezes with a quickly flashed message "alpha send" or some such crap, and then the display returns with a 'battery low' signal. It was charged on the train.

What Is The Matter With You, Fone?

That's Swedish technology for you.

Impatient, she drops the M thing into her pocket and descends the short flight of steps at the station exit. She begins to cross the road. She has other appendages she can use. Besides, it is starting to rule her life. So Vibe looks up, glad to see something other than her wrist for once.

Two cars are parked over by the old car pumps. One of them has a darkened police light on top. A woman in uniform stands by as a man unloads some

plastic cartons from it. He glances at her and holds the glance for just a moment too long, as if guilt obliges him.

There is a shop at the pumps, with food and supplies and stuff. She needs to pick up a few things: a little junk, some snacks. She trots towards it, ignoring them. The brooding urgency of city concerns seems to have lifted from her in this unfamiliar territory. The burden of worry is replaced by the pragmatism of the moment. Travel is useful that way: it rubs out pointless intricacies and replaces them with broad strokes of necessity.

Inside the shop, life is predictably pedestrian. A lone teenager is sitting by the checkout of the mini-mart, dividing his attention between a TV and a security monitor. It could be a scene preserved from twenty years earlier, she thinks. A museum piece, unaware of its own failure to accede to the passage of time.

His eyes fix elsewhere as she enters, but he sees every aspect of his world go by on a monitor screen in front of him. Those four corners are his world, she imagines. And what a predictable and thankless world is framed within it. Only after she has her back to him does she see him turn to give her the once over, in the reflection of a glass door. Well: hot girl—who wouldn't?

Her brother always used to say that, in small incestuous places like this, the whole village must be vampires, because if there were even one then everyone would be bitten by now. He's certainly pale enough, and he hasn't moved much yet, but . . . this is no time for a stake-out.

Bite me! she smiles.

She grabs stuff from the shelves without out stopping to browse. She has most of what she needs—just a little snack for the trip up the mountain. Maybe a new battery for the M thing, in case something is actually wrong with it. A bottle of water for later.

At the checkout, the kid seems kind of cute—or would be if he were five years older. She pulls a few hair strands loose from her pony tail, enjoying the effect it has on him. She is used to having boys look at her. Most of them shouldn't be looking, but this one deserves to think about her later on, when he's alone. He'll ripen.

Racing now. Outside again, she sees the town from the opposing viewpoint. The towering mountains in the background make it a depressing oasis of concrete stonewall, colourless against the powerful rock-faces and forested ascents. It has been only a year since she was last here, but the power of it is still haunting. She feels tiny. Better to get up there before she changes her mind.

Her mobile flinches again and the car with the police light pulls up as she approaches the crossing. The second car has gone, or is out of sight. A woman, dressed up in a badly fitting uniform gets out and approaches her. Her stoney face is pointy and thin; she is too darkly tanned and her hair is pulled back so tightly in a pony tail that it looks like a Do-It-Yourself facelift.

"ID?" she queries flatly — gracious Nordic charity.

Vibe touches her ID-send, and the woman reads of the details on her mobile. "Got her" she says monotonically to the wire in her ear. She does not even look at Vibe. "Unlikely."

"Excuse me?"

"You're going up the mountain?"

"Uh huh."

"Hmmm." She is entering something on her mobile.

"Is there something wrong with that? Is there something I should know?"

"You can't go up there yet. There's a disturbance. Police operation."

"What kind of disturbance?"

She pauses for too long. "Gangs on the loose."

"Gangs?"

"That's what I said."

"But I came here to go up there. What kind of gangs?"

The police woman looks at her with eyes that are too wide. Must be a zombie, or a vampire. "Sign in at mountain rescue, while you're waiting, and don't make any trouble here."

"What? I just arrived."

"How long do you plan being up there?"

"A few days. maybe a week. What did you mean 'got her'?"

"You see the car parked over there just now?" She points to the place where Vibe saw the cars parked.

She shakes her head and shrugs, lying. No sense in asking for trouble.

"We're doing stop-searches in the area."

Vibe shrugs and smiles on the inside.

She's doing a little alcohol trade on the side! Hah. She knows I saw her.

The woman looks her up and down. "Just doing our job. Don't go up there until you get the okay signal from mountain rescue." She looks her up and down once more and runs some kind of scanner over her backpack, checking twice. Then she just says "okay" and gets back into her police car.

It is not even a real police car. It's just her single-mother bang-wagon with a stupid light on top.

As she drives off, Vibe notices a child seat in the back of the car.

So they are arresting kids now. Bitch.

She reels in a local map on her M thing and starts heading towards a taxi that is parked across at the station. So they made the town shine again with a lick of paint and some nice weather, but she doesn't think she'll stay and have kids here after all.

A single drop of October rain lands on her face, from out nowhere, as if protesting against the unusually long summer mildness, and the failure of autumn

to supplant it with any convincing charade of its own. It is a signal for her to hasten her resolve. Besides, the backpack is feeling heavier than she imagined. It will either kill her or do wonders for her stomach contours.

She texts another ridiculous message and sighs, bored with her own habit. *Okay – now we’re sick of the mobile*, she thinks and puts it away.

Stupid invention. So stupid, so necessary.

*

Vibe checks in at the information centre. It is a pokey wooden bungalow with large windows, decorated in predictable Norwegian wood and linoleum flooring, which tapers towards a plastic drain in the middle of the floor—almost as though they are expecting someone to take a shower right there in the middle of the room.

The centre is run by a skinny stick-boy, probably a college student, maybe her own age, and a bulbous fat woman, who is squeezed way too tightly into her blouse.

No grace in denial.

Vibe approaches the desk. They see her, but no-one comes to her aid.

It is deady quiet in the room. It is deady quiet outside. Probably, they see only two people in a whole day at this time of year, but they keep her waiting.

Hey, freaky college student person!

Stick Boy is showing Fat Lady something about the combo workstation on her desk. Something tells her that the ugly one is in charge. Sara decides to put on her glasses, something that makes her look more ordinary, in case her startling good looks should weigh to her disadvantage here.

Hello? Echoes repeating. . . I’m here.

She is not used to being ignored, but she knows enough to recognize when it is deliberate. She turns and browses the information room, looking at maps and leaflets to distract herself from the wait. Best not to lose one’s temper and get off on the wrong foot.

Wave of stress building from within. Can’t control. . . may have to kill. . .

“Do you need any help?” asks the woman, eventually.

“Yes please!” *Suppress urgent need for sarcasm.* “I am going up into the hills. I’m supposed to check in with mountain rescue.”

The woman greets her with an edge of disapproval. “Well. You can’t go up there now. There’s a police operation operation going on.”

Headline, lady: button fatigue causes fat explosion. Danger of deep-frying village. “I heard,” she says. “What’s it about?”

“Some idiots with toy guns are playing up there.”

“Toy guns?” She articulates the words incredulously.

"Paint balls or something," says the student, joining them at the counter. "They are having some kind of war games up there. The cabins are on alert."

"Police don't do anything," says the woman. "They should throw them all in jail." She smiles sullenly.

Seems pleasant enough. Could have misjudged.

A thought occurs to Vibe. Could there be a connection between this information and the reason for her visit here? Her babies are not answering like they are supposed to. How come no one told her about this before?

"So what's the prognosis?" Vibe asks. "How long is it going to take?"

The woman pouts. "Hard to say."

"Hours? Days?"

"You shouldn't get too excited. These things can take time. There is a big area to cover. They are trying to get a helicopter, but the budget has been cut so they don't like using it."

How dangerous could it be?

The mountains are a pretty big place, but that also works in her favour. The chances of her meeting these idiots is pretty small. Besides, it couldn't be any worse than Oslo on a Saturday night. . .

Vibe uncovers her wrist-mobile and says: "Is there somewhere I can wait?"

The woman hits a place on the touch screen to scan Vibe's ID and expected route. Vibe's mobile signals approval of her route. "There's a café just down the road here, on the second floor of the supermarket. They have services, so if you follow our information," (she taps another touch-pad to offer the URI to Vibe's mobile), "you should get the same information we have."

"Thanks," she says. "Maybe I'll do that." The words trickle out innocently enough, but every fibre of her being screams: Lady, you must be out of your mind if you think I am going to that concrete bunker to consume your lousy coffee and perfumed cakes.

"Bye then."

Succumbing to an urge to flee this little time warp, Vibe heads out into the sunshine to make the most of the day. If she cannot do as she pleases then she can at least enjoy the moment. She toys with the idea of visiting the café, but rejects it swiftly. She does not have the funds to extend her stay here. It is out of the question to spend the night here. She needs to get up the mountain. Today.

Vibe walks towards a little square in the town. A pair of tête à tête park benches are getting some sunshine so she drops her backpack onto one of them and sits down to absorb some questionably healthy solar radiation.

As a city girl, she despises the small-town isolation of this place: the unadventurous paranoia about the outside world, the unreasonable contentment with what they have, the blinkered fantasy that their way of life is better. But she can also be bigger than that. She has seen enough to know that there is something

charming and idyllic about a small-town life. The mountains almost embrace this little town as if forming a crucible to hold it, that gazes up at the sky. This is their prison, but also their paradise.

But she is a city girl, with no question or doubt. That is her instinct and it is her image; and a good image is the best way to keep one's personality from overflowing.

From the bench she stares forward at the mountain face in the direction that she must travel. It looms over her with impossible size, so close and yet so reduced to be squeezed into her field of vision. Each gigantic tree on the rocky slope is clearly visible, yet surreal in its insignificance; and the cold rock slowly reveals its intransigence. The longer she gazes at it, the more the picture-postcard idyll transforms into merciless and defiant threat.

A momentary twinge of foreboding grips her. Turn back! She suppresses it as swiftly as it surfaces. She will not think of irrelevant unlikelyhoods now. She is above such things. She is Sara Stensrud and she can do whatever she puts her mind to. It is time to go up the mountain, flouting peril, dodging the dark forces of fate.

She texts to Bea: *Zombies have taken over. Making my escape.*

*

Vibe kicks through dry, powdering leaves—a tossed salad of multi-coloured hand-prints, fracturing and disintegrating into the earth: vampires that saw sunlight. The road from the little town is narrow and straight; trees stand on parade at either side, flaunting their autumnal pomp and finery as if saluting her journey.

She tries to call her contact, Mrs. Laurent, once again, but there is still no reply. She gives up and simply marches onward. Better to be up 'there' with something to do, than down 'here' in the dark, she thinks.

It takes her half an hour to reach the end of the trail, as it curves and winds, up an down, ending in what looks like a farm. A farmhouse is situated just off the road. Her mobile tells her that the path up the mountain starts here. In the distance she can see the densely forested valley rise, meandering upward to some snowy peaks beyond.

Vibe comes to a tractor trail, close to the farmhouse; she can see the metal bridge over the stream that's marked on the map and the actual trail that winds around almost full-circle to avoid an old stone wall, blocked off by a fence. The fence is buckled slightly where hikers have jumped over it, rather than following the path around as they should. She could follow her conscience and take the muddy path along the stone slabs, but the ford she would have to cross looks like a recipe for getting pretty wet and a poor way to start her trip.

Stupid place to put a fence anyway, she thinks.

The fence then.

A man, off in the distance, next to a barn, shouts to her. She turns and squints to look at him. The sound of his voice echoes around the farmyard a little, and is otherwise lost in the void. It does not make much sense to her, but she can see that he is gesticulating, pointing with a finger. She is not sure what he is saying, but she can guess and she sure as hell doesn't care much for his tone.

He is reminding her that she should follow the path.

Guess again, mate, she thinks. Had you asked me nicely. . .

Besides, Sara Vibeke Stensrud is used to getting her way.

I am a spoiled child, she thinks. That gives me certain rights.

She pushes down the thin wire that is already ruined and begins to climb over it. It is not too high, but there is an elasticity to it that makes it non-trivial to keep it down as she swings her backpack-laden form over it. Her stomach muscles give a satisfying scream of stress, indicating that her stomach will be hard and muscular after this trip.

As she tumbles onto the grass on the other side, she checks on him and sees that he is getting into a tractor. He is shouting again. No matter, she will have crossed the little metal bridge by the time he is even close. It is just ten metres from her now, thanks to this short-cut. Perhaps he will follow her up the mountain and hunt her down, like a wild animal. Heh-heh. He can try.

She starts up the stoney path, carved through the dense forest, rising sharply upward in zig-zag up the steep wall of the valley. It reminds her of her childhood trips, the misery of physical exertion, but the ultimate satisfaction of achievement. Somehow it seemed worse in her memory.

Sweat begins to moisten her T-shirt and her breath grows short. This is when one could wish to be on the Moon. The walking will be good for her though: flat tummy, firm backside. It will make some cute boy's day, or night.

She passes a red "T" symbol painted onto a tree, indicating the tourist route and feels comforted that she is on the path. It shouldn't be long before she starts to see some of her babies.

Down below she can hear the farmer shouting. Is he still shouting at her? Christ, she thinks, get over it!

The forest pathway is still mostly dirt, but the slope steepens quickly. She can't text while walking for much longer. She packs away the little keypad and concentrates on placing her feet in the right place. Walking up rocky paths is an art of balance. If you proceed with grace, poise and slow determination, it is a simple matter. If you scramble around in uncertain movements, you are likely to slip and use up twice the amount of energy. It is meditative; it requires her attention and prevents her from doing anything other than completing this singular navigation of the trail.

The steady plodding up the hill erases time from her consciousness. She has been climbing for as long as she can remember and it will last a lifetime yet. It is like being a graduate student, she thinks. She is enacting a representation of her life. You start on the path and you have no idea where you are going. Then you end up on a trail that you are unsure of. It starts slowly then rises sharply and you chug away at it, utterly mesmerized by the singularity of the task, and completely unaware of how you are proceeding. Better watch your step or you might be falling before you know it.

She is here to take command of the obstacles that plague her. *Jesus, freak, get it together.*

After an indiscernible time, the path seems to dissolve ahead of her, and the trees scatter as if startled by her arrival. Through the remaining cover, shafts of sunlight fire aimlessly at the trail. As she emerges into the bright sunlight, she raises her hands as if to stave off the sky. The vastness of the void is above her, and down below are rocks and mud.

2

Light rain and a morning chill have summoned forth the tantalizing smell of eucalyptus. The University of California in San Diego, UCSD has a beautiful campus, and the walk up the road from the guesthouse is pleasantly shady and cool, but Den has decided to take a swim in the pool before walking up to his meeting. It is quiet at the motel guesthouse. Most of the guests are busy guzzling their breakfast or watching TV in the lounge, so he has the pool to himself.

The water is still and clear. He thrusts himself into it, shattering its glassy surface and replacing it with frothing waves that spill outwards to the edges. He feels bubbles of air loosening from his body as he cuts through it, ploughing an expanding dovetail of ripples through the water.

As he swims, Den runs through the walk up to the campus in his mind. He dress-rehearsed yesterday; now he tests himself on his mental agility. It will be important for them to feel that he is sharp and confident. Den can certainly be confident on the surface. He makes a good impression. He still has youthful good looks and can be charming, in an English sort of way, when he needs to

be. He hasn't come this far without being in command of his faculties. But that kind of discipline requires constant testing. He likes to use the training time for running through his list.

Remember to take charge of the meeting at once. Make sure that you have all the facts in your head. Marketing is a subtle business and the culture here is quite different from European culture. He should be sure to demonstrate his command of both worlds. Then there is his other agenda, but not something that can come out. He has to be convincing.

Coming to America is always a mixed blessing. The increasing militarization of the borders makes it harder to move around. So far the anti-terrorism laws have not made a significant impact on tourism and business, but soon it will be necessary to wear electronic visa inside the country. It seems absurd to Den. Even prisoners can opt out of wearing their dog tags if they stay in one place. Tourists will be more accountable. The freedom of movement will be at a premium, easy in prearranged tours by bus or by plane, but difficult by car or in solo. He must make the most of the freedoms while they still survive.

He will hire – no *rent* a car.

Still, the annoyance of a barrage of questions about his intentions make the whole effort somewhat tiresome. Soon he hopes that his connections with the top players in the game venture will afford him certain privileges in that regard.

He ducks his head down and swims in long broad breast strokes just under the surface, enjoying the extra thrust and speed it affords him. It charges him with a sense of power. He feels muscular, larger somehow and in command, isolated in the watery cocoon from the reality of the surroundings.

"Morning, sir. How are you today?", says a hotel employee who comes around the corner of the building to his right.

"Morning," his primitive brain responds. He nods back with a smile, enjoying the pleasantly formal courtesy here in the United States.

A couple of young kids hiding behind some erupting fronds peer at him and his audacious morning display. They giggle and tease him, fully aware that he can see them. Hide and seek?

He suppresses an instinct to join in. Now is not the time to let down his concentration. Success requires a measure of control, of personal sacrifice. No pain, no gain, darling, *nez pah*? Whose pain? His or theirs?

Ghosts of supposed obligation. Focus, Den. Who are they? Young, middle class, thin, white. Their eyes are probably blue. She likes horses and he likes the tanks. His mind skips through a dozen stereotypes that characterize the moment. Always stay on your toes. Friendship can wait. This moment is about branching out of the box and becoming something.

Den reaches up and lifts himself from the envelope of the pool; he feels the transitory chill of the warming air seep into his limbs. His hand grabs a towel and

rubs his body lightly down then throws on a robe. The fibres will dry his skin and gently exorcise the dead skin cells of his outer shell, cleansing his skin as well as his mood. He dons his pool slippers and flip-flops back to his room, avoiding a small cleaning device that cringes respectfully into a ball as he approaches it.

Den climbs the short wooden steps, up the outside of the hotel wing to the second floor, where his fingerprints grant him access to the suite. The room seems dark and murky after the brightly lit morning, but the carpet is soft and television lights up as he enters.

There are chairs and tables as well as a bed, even a refrigerator and a kitchen here, with a breakfast bar, but he will probably not use it. He is not really sure why anyone would need such a thing. It makes the room seem cold and inappropriate but he affords it less than a passing thought as he moves directly to the shower. The air is naturally conditioned for temperature, humidity and scent which is unfamiliar and rather than relaxing him seems to trigger a disconcerting sense of suspicion. There must surely be a limit to how invasive environmental controls can be. Certainly the boundaries are far from what he is used to. He wonders why, in such a beautiful area with semi-natural fragrances like eucalyptus, they could not simply open the window and be done with it. Perhaps it would require additional insect control. Whatever.

He slips into the shower and lets the perfect water temperature massage his scalp and shoulders as the shampoo and conditioner revitalize his jet-lagged hair and the soap creams his skin. The hotel bathroom products are pleasant, he has to admit and they perform their duty in removing the effects of the chlorine from the pool. The hotel chain has probably paid handsomely for their own characteristic scent.

Emerging from the steamy cubicle, he catches sight of the television in the bedroom. An ad is chiming away. As always, he is both fascinated and revolted by the advertising culture here. It is his job, but this is so alien to him.

INTRODUCING NEW DENTINE BRIGHT! DENTINE BRIGHT CLEANS BRIGHTER AND FASTER, REJUVENATING DEEP INTO YOUR TOOTH ENAMEL. NO MORE FILLINGS WITH DENTINE BRIGHT. DENTINE BRIGHT CONTAINS ACTIVE INGREDIENT CLEANATAN – SCIENTIFICALLY PROVEN TO GIVE BETTER CLEANING. JUST LOOK AT HOW DENTINE BRIGHT CLEANS AND POLISHES TO GIVE A BETTER BRIGHTER SMILE. “I USE DENTINE BRIGHT BECAUSE IT GIVES ME CONFIDENCE IN MY SMILE. IN MY JOB IT IS SO IMPORTANT TO FEEL CLEAN AND FRESH AND MY SMILE GIVES ME CONFIDENCE I NEED TO SUCCEED.” WHY DON’T YOU TRY DENTINE BRIGHT AND IMPRESS YOUR FRIENDS WITH . . .

The ad goes on relentlessly bashing away at the product name, but Den kills the sound as quickly as he can find the remote. Good grief, he thinks. It is a far cry

from the ad his company made for the UK market. There they had created a scene in a caravan home with a middle aged man and woman. The man had bad breath and filthy teeth and was reaching for a bag of sweets (candy!). His wife slaps his hand with a fly swatter and gives him a tube of the new toothpaste, sending him off to the bathroom to brush. A week later, he is transformed into a smiling prince with a perfect smile and his wife admires him with 'that's better' kind of look. As she turns around, satisfied with a job well done, he sees the bag of sweets still there and the camera zooms in, in slow motion, as his heart pounds and streaming saliva runs down his teeth like a pastiche of the classic *Alien* movies. Suddenly a second set of teeth snaps forward and grabs the sweet bag, swallowing it whole, as his wife simply rolls her eyes. A voice over concludes: "Icy Fresh – gives you twice the smile of any other toothpaste."

He cannot help but smile at the memory. It is a far cry from the bombardment technique used here. But that, after all, is why they need him here. It is his job to understand these cultural chasms. They separate the continents into cells so discontinuous that they might have been forged on the very anvil of the ocean ridges themselves. Without his help their efforts would simply perish in a burial of subduction. He has been given an opportunity here, like everyone else and he has come to use it.

Den dresses quickly and heads down to breakfast, down the stairs, around around the short path to the main entrance; past the check-in desk to a dining room full of what seems to be families and groups of people. He dispatches breakfast quickly as he sizes up the people sitting here, watching the television in the corner of the room intently as they shovel down everything from melon to pancakes.

This is all part of the psych up. He has come here for a purpose. He has come to learn and to impress, to mingle and to climb. The cat is out of the bag for them now.

Someone has tuned the television to CSPAN, a refreshingly naked news discussion, he thinks, but with so many opportunities missed to convey a message. It is not long before the hotel management come and change it back to a different news channel, with its rolling text strip and staged presenters. Well, he has had his moment of peace at the pool, now it is time to rejoin the rat race.

He runs through his list again. He knows it. He can do it. I am here, he thinks. He eats lightly, still feeling a little sick from the long flight, checks the time and leaves the breakfast hall, dropping by his room to collect his stuff. Then, released into the Californian air, he stands at the edge of the flagstone path, looking out to the awakening freeway. A sign is planted at the side of the path. In the UK it would have said: PLEASE DO NOT WALK ON THE GRASS. Here it says. ATTENTION: FLOOR MAY BE SLIPPERY WHEN WET. He stares at it for a few seconds, realizing where he is.

Beating down on the calm forest of palms and bushes, the sun and its cloudless consort of blue, warm him to the bone. No sign of the chilly morning now. It has evaporated, like the mist from the pool, winding up in miniature vortices, fledgling tornadoes. A light breeze is blowing on his legs. Den checks that he has the necessary items in his portfolio and starts up the embankment from the parking lot of the motel towards UCSD.

3

The sound of distant water. At first, just a dull whisper, like a broken radio, or wind in the leaves. It grows slowly, gaining definition with each step. Then around the corner, the stream is there, erupting on her senses with a clarity, sharp and angular. Splashing water, tumbling over rocks. She fills her flask and drinks.

Sara Vibe Stensrud slips off her backpack for a moment to rest. She is making slower progress than she anticipated. Her goal is to reach the first of the cabins before evening meal, but she has not been to the gym for some time; aerobic training has festered into anaerobic misery. But she will make it. She always has her way.

The water rushes past in this little valley outcrop. She is not far from a waterfall. She stoops to splash some water onto her face. Her cheeks are rosy now; she can feel the heat in her face. Best not to meet anyone like this. She will coast for a while once she gets close to the cabin, to cool off and recover a more becoming complexion.

Her breath billows in the damp air near the stream. This is a fantastic place, wild and rugged and free from empty restriction. She feels alive here, but it is getting cold. She needs to keep moving.

She checks her distance from the cabin on her wristband, as she loosens the strap. It seemed like a good idea to wear this handy accessory to keep her hands free and warm, but she forgets how the sweat builds up underneath the strap making the whole thing pretty icky. It itches. She takes it off and examines the soft screen, flattening it out to get a better image.

The map seems to be stuck on a position from some time ago. According to it, she is not even on the screen. She zooms out, with cold fingers. to see the

stream where she is standing and sees the 'X' that marks her current position. She still has satellite contact, but mobile cell connectivity is not so good in the dips and troughs of the landscape. She won't get more detail until she moves into the open again. So, for now, she will just have to make do with the painted T's for-tourist, painted on the rocks along the trails. Just like the good old days.

Vibe gets a direction and stuffs the wristband into a pocket, hoisting up her backpack, tightening the belt a little and summoning resolve. Better not rest for too long; if she sits down and relaxes, she might never get moving again. Besides, the sun will be going down in about an hour, so she needs to get to the cabin.

She clammers up the boulder scree, away from the stream and towards the greenish, grassy hills that roll across this plateau top. An edge, an eyeful of the valley off to the right: the sinking sun and the thickening cloud. She stops for a moment, remembering this view from a previous trip. When was it? It seems a long time ago, in a different life. A little splash of nostalgia tears into her present detachment. It is worth remembering things like that, memories of the past, but only when she is alone.

*

She spent many summers here, in the mountains, with Bea and her family, walking through the mountains, like a troop of Girl Guides. They were the 'mountain troupe'; not exactly hard core outdoors freaks, but strutting their own stuff, according to their own script. It was only when she turned sixteen that they came here together, by themselves, and experienced the freedom that comes from having one's parents at bay. That was a summer that changed everything for her.

She borrowed a backpack from Bea's brother; he, in turn, dutifully refused to join the ranks of their essentially female regiment. The pack made her special. It used to belong to Bea's father. It was covered in sew-on patches and sported dozens of small tears from its weathered history. She liked the pack. It was solid and real, and had more character (and certainly more credibility) than the pink vanity cases the other girls were towing through nature's noble corridor. Bea's younger sister, Nina, looked up at her tall form with awe and admiration, through freckles and eyelashes. Her hair was spiky, mostly on top, like an exploding fountain of red. "You're so beautiful, Sara," she said. Somehow, the thought had never occurred to her before. With the lead backpack, she felt a new importance, like a leader of the pack.

Bea was cooler than all the others she knew. Sara always thought so. There was, after all, a reason they became best friends. When other girls were conspicuously going to parties, openly pretending to enjoy alcohol and boys (while hiding their pony magazines under their single beds), Sara and Bea were climbing trees and hanging out with boys because they were cool and because they

weren't so goddamn self-absorbed and bitchy. They both had brace retainers on their teeth back then. They felt like two fanged wolves, scurrying around in the wild. Other than their friendship, they had little in common. Perhaps that was part of it.

Sara was never much impressed by the boys of her age, but she knew she was attractive to them. They would whistle at her with that vulgar barbarism that boys feigned, or perhaps it was even real, but it did nothing for her. She had a mild crush on her math teacher, until he seriously dummed out by telling them that the reason hair waves were called 'perms' came from the mathematical term 'permutation'. Duh, please.

The boys of her own age were mostly clueless and clumsy, but there was one who was quiet and smart and good looking. He was a loner, though: shy and deep looking. She liked that, but he was way too introverted for her then. Not to be.

She went to a special school in those days. A school that was supposed to teach old-fashioned academic values, Dad's idea. He wanted her to grow up smart, not like the regular idiot savants that schools pump out, he said. Not many boys to choose from.

Sara did not really find her natural connection with boys until that summer. After her trip to the mountains, her father invited some French and American scientists home. Peter Green. The handsome one. He was young and dark. He had an intensity that she found magnetic and when he looked at her, she felt like jelly. She flirted with him openly. She was riding on the crest of a boosted self-image, having been troop queen for the younger sisters and Bea.

There was a party one night, just before they were about to leave, and she made sure that she was close to him. She wore a short white skirt to show off her long legs and a white sleeveless T-shirt that showed her belly button and small breasts. White sports shoes. She was purity. She left her hair long, not tied back, just pushed behind her ears. She practised a smoldering look.

The scientists were seated in a group of chairs and sofas in the crowded living room. There were all kinds of people from the University and people she had never seen before. She made certain that she was next to him, on the arm of the sofa and told him that she wanted to practice her English. When they were finished talking, she stood there, in the tightly packed room, next to him, so that her leg was next to his arm. She listened to him speak. He was calm, a bit forceful. He did not ignore her, even though he was talking to others. She felt important, sexy.

At first he put his hand on the back of her leg playfully, taking it away again, causally, not too forward, as he waved his hands in explanation. But she knew what he was thinking. Then, as she responded by bumping causally towards him and brushing him with her body, she started. His hand touched the inside of her

thighs from behind, just gently with fingers brushing her at first. In the cover of the crowd, no one else could see; it gradually crept higher, testing her resolve, until his index finger just touched her panties in the rift between her legs and his thumb stroked the crease of her buttocks. He kept his hand there for several seconds. Her breathing became heavy but she forced herself to maintain her outward appearance as though nothing unusual was afoot. Even years later, the excitement she felt still paralyses her with its intensity. Such audacity, such a thrill of excitement from someone so safe. Finally, he removed his hand and she put her hand on his shoulder to steady herself, and then fled to a place where she could sit alone for a while and touch the spot where his hand had been. The next time she saw him, they both smiled coyly, but nothing more was said of it, and then he was gone. Peter Green.

It has always been hard to describe the sense of freedom she felt after that, to justify it and understand it, yet it altered her somehow. Sara has always been a loose canon, impulsive and unapologetic. That summer, she became freer, she became Vibe.

Both Sara and Vibe always had their way. Her father always gave in to her, in spite of her mother's protests. Unlike many of her girlfriends, she felt an almost boyish passion for life. He let her be herself. She was never contented to simply coast along in the passenger seat, or wait for fortune to come to her. She always wanted to take the rudder and sail into stormy waters, to find the nexus, the place where something is happening. To hell with passive girl friends, waiting for life to show them what to do.

Something about her encounter that summer fostered the realization that she could be independent and that it was not only her father who would accede to her wishes. But then her father died suddenly of a heart condition, not long after the visit. He was still young, in his fifties, but there was some congenital weakness. She contained her emotions well in public, but she was devastated. She resolved to honour his trust in her by making the most of her life. Her only regret was that Bea could not join her on her quest. She was not the school kind. But she was still the only one who would keep her company during her struggle.

By the time that summer was over, she knew that there was no turning back. She was committed to a different path. The forces of destiny would steer her away from her remaining family, to a future that no one had considered for her.

Vibe focused on her studies, enjoying boys like a commodity, only when it suited her. She studied for three years at Oslo University College, learning programming and system design. She pursued her own interests, seeking a path of her own rather than following on her father's footsteps, or her mother's. Her mother set her straight on that, when she occasionally doubted her own judgement. She enjoyed mathematics and chemistry, but felt she needed to understand the all-pervasive tools of computing and communications. They are all around.

By the end of her degree, she felt as though she had transformed her view of the world, but she was weary of machines and their virtual worlds and felt that there must be more that she could apply her skills to. Computer science seemed like an empty shell: a skill to build things, but without a vision of what to build. She enrolled in courses of linguistics, mathematics and in environmental engineering to bide her time while she considered her options. She joined Bellona and learned how to enjoy the environment in a responsible way. She joined Bea and her family more often after that, walking in the mountains from cabin to cabin. It was a good way to keep in touch with her friend and to get out into the environment. Bea became a hairdresser.

Ultimately, it was a professor at the College working in the management of computer systems who convinced her that she could combine all her talents by applying technology to better the environment. She enrolled in a Ph.D. programme with the project of a lifetime, a project to make everyone envious: the testing and development of commercial applications of planetary robotic technology in mountain tourism and maintenance.

It seemed like an odd thing to do, developing little robots to wander around the Norwegian mountains, but where better to test such technologies than in a place where there is both highly variable terrain and sufficient human infrastructure to keep tabs on them. They could be put to work for the tourist board, maintaining and monitoring, helping mountain rescue.

At first the challenge had seemed almost too enormous to grasp, but she dismissed her fears and overrode them with a leap of faith. I can do it if I want to, she thought. Besides, who else could appreciate this unique mixture of skills as well as I can? It was not a case of talking her into it. It was just perfect.

Her college professor shrugged it off, joking: if you want to reach for the stars, you should build a rocket rather than waiting for the sky to fall on your head. So, standing on this very spot, two years ago, she decided to reach for the stars.

Ad astra, baby.

*

Streaky white freckles have opened up in the moonlit sky. This new pattern could mean a change of fortune; changing winds often mean precipitation is on the way. It could be snowing within the hour.

Vibe reaches the barely perceptible summit of an asymptotic climb, flouting Zeno and his stupid paradox to reach the top. It seems to have taken her hours to conquer this minor bump, winding upward through mud and stones, but she is careful not to pay attention to time. A watched kettle never makes the top.

Down below, in shadow, she sees a thin strip of a flag flapping in the chilly breeze, and the warm lights of the cabin she has been aiming for, with its grassy

roof and dormitories. Her mobile signal has been strong for some time now and she has already checked in. They should be expecting her. She flashes her new ETA to reserve dinner. She should make it to the first sitting, in spite of being late. Oddly, she has not received any reply from the French team. Where are you?

No cinder of daylight remains now. She is following the trail by fortuitous moonlight. She sets off down the hill at a faster pace.

It doesn't take long. The stone steps leading to the cabin are a little too steep to run up, but Vibe feels an exuberant lightness of step as she reaches her goal. This is it. She's arrived. Soon it will be down to work, and . . . well, one thing at a time.

She approves of the cabin, with the exception of a rank smell of overflowed sewage. The entrance is less kitschy than many of the other cabins she has been to. There are no overbearing wood-carvings or fake runes to greet her, no models of trolls for the tourists, just a simple sign saying "Reception this way". In the Norwegian way it says "Eksepedisjon" or place of expedition. A fitting double entendre for the traveller.

It is close to dinner time. The benches where people are supposed to take off or put on their boots are empty and there is a buzz of conversation coming from inside. It is a strangely comforting sound after a day of isolation. She arrives at the cabin lodge to meet the team.

*

"Hello," she says, with a smile. "I have a room for the night. I booked ahead."

The man at the reception taps away at a touch screen and scans Vibe's mobile.

"You know that you shouldn't be walking around up here alone now? We are on alert up here."

She nods. "I know. They told me down below. I have business up here."

"Well, you're here now."

"Yeah."

"You should check in your position so they don't have kittens. Here's your towel. Single room or dorm?"

"Better make it a single tonight," she says. It occurs to her that her mobile has already reported her position to the police and rescue service.

He uploads a key into her mobile and she stores it.

"I am supposed to be meeting a group of French scientists here tonight. Do you know where they are? At dinner, perhaps?"

He looks back at her with wide eyes that she is unable to fathom. There is no show of emotion in them, nor is there any sign that he has comprehended her question. He seems to have expedited her and there is nothing more to say.

“French? A group of them? I guess I’ll find them here somewhere.”

She searches his face for some sign—some trace of understanding, or, indeed, of anything. She finds it dead, devoid of content, as if all of his facial muscles have died in some fatal brain crash. He is disinterested; he is merely dis.

She goes out into the darkening evening and looks around at the shadowy mountain scenery. Her room is across in the next cabin outhouse. In the dark, the ground between the cabin and the VeiVek at the base of the valley seems like an explosion of rubble, as though the aftermath of some great catastrophe. Defiant tree-sentinels line the forest edge, as if forming a quasi-human shield against the explosion. The boulders bear their granite teeth, smashed by some gigantic blow to the mouth of the rock.

This is the night from which she emerged only moments ago, yet already it seems hostile and alien. She is glad to finally be here in the shelter of the cabin.

An old fashioned key turns a lock. A door creaks open. A wooden bed with a simple *douvé* and pillow and a sink. Vibe sets down her backpack and sits down to take off her walking boots to swap for something more suitable for indoor use.

I can’t stay here in a single room for long, she thinks. Not unless I can get some funding for this trip.

She checks for voice messages on her mobile. Nothing, Jonas Lindgren, her secondary advisor, now at the Research Council. Where are you Jonas? Where is my money? She tried contacting him before leaving and again on the train, but he is not answering.

She opens her pack, pulls out shoes and fresh clothes and washes up for dinner. She texts a quick message to the leader of the French group, Mrs. Laurent, but receives no reply. The French team has been out here testing the research and environmental monitoring capabilities of the VeiVeks. They promised to meet her to show her the ropes and go through some of the procedures in the field. So why no answer?

They are not even here.

She feels like an idiot and reels off a string of cuss words to pollute the environment a little more. Sorry, plants. Does anyone give a crap how much effort to took her to get here?

No answer. But she’d better go and check.

Vibe feels as if she has somehow been catapulted light years from home. What is the point of a mobile if you can’t get what you want when you want it? The rugged wilderness has seldom seemed so inhospitable as now. She resolves to lift her spirits with a little company.

4

STOP PRESS! *The cat is out of the bag.*

So the international newspapers say. The story has been leaked. The penny has dropped, the cat has scatted. Talk show hosts are mentioning it, conspiracy theorists are discussing it in private channels and even within the game itself. But here, in the US, no one is even wrinkling their whiskers. Virtual Reality – VR.

Virreality, Virreality, there is nothing like Virreality, in all the world, that vain and temperamental cat!

The game. Is it a fad? Is it good or bad? It is the VR scenic programmable chat-room, cat-room. And none should be the wiser about what has transpired beneath the surface. Users can meet, interact and play games with each other. They can win points by being good to each, or by killing the enemies of society. But what is it in reality?

Virreality, Virreality, a fiend of illusion and a master of depravity!

They go there to meet, to talk, to fight, to race, to dance, to love and to make art. They go there to be different or to be the same; they face their fears or they hide their shame.

But not every game is a game. Words and phrases are not always chosen to describe the truth of the matter. A veil of imagery can be designed to camouflage rather than to reveal; intention clouded in diversion; plain surfaces adorned with graffiti and slogans that delude the onlooker. Some see what they want to see. If playfulness is the art of mischief, then mischief is a game of deception.

Virreality, a master of disguise who invents the law. You seek her here or seek her there, but Virreality is not really there!

Delegates and conference attendees have gathered in the air conditioned melting pot of the public conference centre, centred on the larger auditoria in the UCSD campus. They are queueing up to register for this public event, the unveiling of the mystery cat. Carefully cooled, scrubbed and ionized air is tense with expectation following the alleged revelations about the unscrupulous intentions of the game. Almost everyone here has been involved in making it, but still there fosters a doubt in the backs of their minds. No one is stupid, but how far might they have been duped? Consider the embarrassment, the breach of trust.

Decades have been invested in the technology of computer games, to reach the sophistication that can be called a virtual reality. Distributed code and pro-

cessing, on a public Internet, has made a new generation of interactive meeting places possible. Now they are here. Rejoice the advertisers, rejoice the governments.

At first, they imagined a complex web of scenarios, built into ever more programmed entertainments, but as always, it is the simplest ideas that are the best. From instant messaging to chat rooms and virtual realms to immersive games, the progression has captured the widest possible audience, using any and every language, interfaced by a nexus of universal communication and trust. The technology to reach into minds, young and old, wanting or lonely; it is embraced by anyone and everyone needing a lifeline to a wider community, or seeking a release from the stress of proximity..

Not only do personal mobiles allow players to enter the game from wherever they might be, they equip every person with their own social body armour. No one needs to meet anyone, no one needs to risk anything in an encounter. They are safe and deluded. They filter out anything they do not want to see. The quiet, the reserved and the shy are the winners and the losers in this game. The game allows them to be whomever they want to be. But in the end, the illusion of contact is the only contact they have with others. No more having to confront their fears.

And when the world thinks she is asleep, she's always wide awake!

Games are Big Business. E3 LA OK. Action games, muddled together with the popular chat rooms: interactive environments mixing traditional problem solving with action and interaction in every imaginable fantasy: Hollywood companies and traditional action gaming companies funding the creation of a fully blown experiment to link home computers into a common generated environment. Open, free software. Al the world can join in. An amalgamation of popular and enticing meeting places. Virtual environments and businesses reaching out to the wider world of possibility.

There is a new economy to be won from trivial pursuits. Sponsorship alone for advertising, in this new space, is generating new markets and new opportunities. Given such as soap box, there are few voices who would not like to be heard.

From a gentle miaowing to a the lion's roar, this cat creeps in and out of everybody's door. Oil and gas tycoons with power galore.

Few have not been seduced by the idea of a controlling share in this adventure. Den and his company have been given the rights to develop message broadcasting technologies. It is a huge privilege, a considerable status, but there will be no resting on laurels here. The world of advertising and marketing is cut-throat and humans do not have nine lives.

Even from the start, Den realized that the possibilities were breathtaking and his head-start has been a fortuitous advantage in the arena. They have known

for years that games would be a new dimension for marketing: every object, every movement, every colour or attribute of a virtual world is a potential icon for something. The skillful orchestrator of those attributes can make subliminal connections that will plant names, products, perhaps even attitudes in receptive minds.

Of course it is a tricky business. Too much, and they will simply shut down. Sometimes even Den feels the need to close his mind even to the simplest, most primitive advertising imagery, posted on the trains and tunnels of the London Underground. The barrage of messages and imagery can be overwhelming. Little catch phrases from posters go around and around in his head, driving him crazy. Now imagine the possibilities in a virtual world. Total immersion and total control over the environment. Imagine how total immersion could be used to direct thought.

China has complained to the U.S: government about the excessive freedom of access to the game. They have imposed strict filtering policies on the content, but not even they can be sure that they have filtered every subtle message.

Norway, a gaming nation proud of its cultural heritage, was early in wanting to inject national cultural values into the scenery, so that generations of Norwegians would not grow up learning only Hollywood fabricated culture.

Other nations have followed suit. So far, activist lobbies have not argued seriously for regulation of access to virtual realms. The game, after all, is very carefully designed to allow people to see almost exactly what they want to see. How could it possibly offend? But it has set everyone thinking.

When all this came together and exploded into the world in a cosmogony of network reinvention, it was a force that could not be stopped. Corporate wishes and multimedia fantasies attracted each other like the explosive matter of a stellar nursery, falling gradually in on itself and igniting with the mesmerizing blaze of future profits.

Virreality, the unstoppable cat.

To the attendees of this meeting, the undertaking seems truly massive, and representatives from all parts of the world have flocked here for the public meeting. Some of the participants are saying: this is a drop in the ocean compared to SIGGRAPH, but one must remember that here is only the chosen elite, the controlling interest. The true numbers are more far staggering.

As Den arrives, he collects his registration package, his badge and begins to mingle. He knows a few faces from his personal involvement over the last few years, but there are many newcomers. It will not be easy to find anyone here during this public event. It will be the private meetings that count the most.

After he has given a speech on the benign involvement of the international marketing companies in designing game scenarios, he will probably be inundated with people wanting to ask him questions. He still needs to focus.

Never mind causal interest and pats on the back.

Friendship can wait. This is about achieving success.

Looking at the faces here, it is hard to know what to think. Will they buy it? Does he really buy it himself? Who is he kidding?

Listening to the eager effervescence of American accents around him, he feels like an outsider. The involvement of foreign contractors was always controversial to the game executive, but advisors and sub-contractors have been engaged to work on it from the start. Naturally, each company or individual was made to sign a contract of absolute secrecy. Some kind of deal was done with patents that Den could not understand, To him it barely seemed legal, but he is no expert.

They needed help. Even a U.S. led collaboration could not solve all of the problems internally. Cheap labour from the Far East, to create the code base quickly; advisors from Europe, the Middle East, Africa and Asia were engaged to design scenery and advertising styles, as well as to decide on the boundaries for allowed behaviour—what users logged on from different regions would be allowed to see and do.

There is no cat in the metropolis that holds so many patent monopolies, for performing surprising illusions and eccentric confusions. . .

One government senator is reputed to have complained: “Can we allow these outsiders into the project?”

“Senator,” his counterpart rebuked, “without these outsiders we would not have the technology at all. We need to speak their language at the very least.”

Later he was to be shrouded in scandal for the allegation that the next major threat against America was to come from the European Community rather than Russia or China. We have given too much away! Time to take it back. Forget about Mao’s little red book, focus on the NSA’s Red Book. Unfortunately that would be a significant loss of revenue for the U.S, and money talks in Washington. The senator was eventually silenced but not before it had been reported in the Herald Tribune and the story broadcast.

Then the dam broke. A month ago, a story was leaked to the press from an unknown source, claiming that the game was really a ploy by the U.S. government to extend its public diplomacy engine, so as to reach out to children all over the world and show falsely romantic ideals of the American Dream with the help of the game.

From good press to bad press, a panacea suddenly turned into a pathogen. A web of communication, enabling the world to talk a common language, or advanced spy-ware, for eavesdropping on the activities of the entire world of users. Voices have claimed that it is to be used as a form of espionage, for information collection, but the proof? So far no one has managed to prove it. Surely, with so many experts watching, it would not be possible to pull such a fast one.

Peace activists argue that, by providing agency-sponsored war games for kids at home, the game designers could keep Americans and their allies attuned to the idea of violent intervention, paving the acceptance for future military interventions when necessary. By making the use of weapons a natural part of everyday life, the game designers could render the anti-gun lobby irrelevant and fanatical in the eyes of common people.

Well, I never; was there ever a cat so clever?

*

And so, the conference convenes and it is Den's turn to speak.

Focus. Success. Impress.

Trickling words, captured and assimilated. From aimless wandering through the avenues of possibility, hoisted onto a stage to act out his part. He has come to explain how marketing opportunities will be managed within the game. Is he doing their bidding, or serving his own agenda?

After all, the game is the very paw print of Western capitalism. His company alone won the right to develop the technologies for advertising in VR. The challenge is to avoid the mistakes of the past: information overload. In VR there are more opportunities to tie directed appeals into individuals' preferences, in an intelligent and context sensitive way.

"But aren't you really saying that you now have the ability to control people's emotions, tap into their real desires and fantasies and impress them with a specific tailored temptation?"

"Some have called it the nano-technology of information. Micro-managing the very bits of a person's profile."

"It is all about information."

"Well," Den replies coolly, "the game allows users to filter out things they don't want to see, so in that sense this is a space in which their interests are better protected than ever before."

"Doesn't that assume that they know how to do it?"

"Well, we can't mollycoddle them all the time. Everyone has a basic responsibility to look after themselves."

"In other words, you're betting on the fact that they won't!"

No answer is forthcoming.

“Also, we have extensive user testing. We listen to the responses of users, their desires and needs in groups of subjects from every part of the world.”

Someone breaks in. “I think it is important to remember that this is a commercial venture, not a charity program. Someone has to pay for this, and we want the technology to pay for itself.”

“Yes, yes, but in the process we are giving the world a whole new technology to communicate with – with built-in universal translation! Never before has an African tribesman been able to communicate with a broker on the Hong Kong stock exchange, without an interloper, and in an environment of their mutual choosing. The possibilities for diplomacy alone are enormous.”

“But aren’t we also giving a new opportunity for organized crime and terrorism to flourish?”

A fiend of illusion, a master of depravity.

“Why would there be warfare or terrorism when ordinary people of the world can talk to one another without the intervention of their political leaders.”

“I think that view is somewhat naive.”

“Yes, Mr. Morris, you make it sound like a panacea, but this game has already been reviled as a political conspiracy—a private channel for western corporate and U.S. government propaganda.”

“What do you say to claims that it is fly-paper for organized crime?”

“Positive arguments for the game include the ability to covertly monitor illegal transactions by simply using anonymous software to signal anomalous transactions. Working with the FBI, Europol investigators have foreseen both the dangers of a virtual environment for organized crime and also the potential for setting traps for mafia organizations and child pornography rings from around the world. We are well aware of the possibilities.”

“Mr. Morris, research into virtual realities and business spaces has been the official line on the game, and users have been quick to play the demonstration scenarios, like fighting in the U.S. Marines in Afghanistan and Iraq, joining the International Space Station and a range of favourite movie scenarios. It is not natural that America should be a scapegoat for every paranoid conspiracy now? After all, only the Americans have had the industrial might to initiate the game, and the environment of freedom to develop it. We are the maker of dreams.”

“If there is a conspiracy, it is that now everyone would like to hijack this great invention for their own purpose. The game executive issued a press release saying that, if there is any control or influence over behaviour in the game, it was made to instill moral values into a potentially unethical technology. These values should be sound American values of freedom, opportunity and morality. By offering a voice of hope and freedom the world over there must be positive

repercussions. Fewer kids will turn to terrorism against the Western allies if they can see another way.”

“Of course, they fail to mention that multinational corporations have no ethics. They will deal with the devil himself if they can make a profit.”

“Well, we don’t call it corruption when it’s business.”

“Powerful evangelists from the Bible belt made their bid but the matter was never spoken about again.”

“In America, we have a constitutional separation of church and state, but we cannot keep religion out of peoples’ lives!”

“Halley, an opposition member in the house, had promised a public debate on the ethics of the game. He was due to give his speech last year, but was shot and killed in his car by a gang in Washington D.C. - murder capital of the U.S. Do you have any comment on that?”

The cat seems to have escaped its bag.

But who did it? Who is responsible?

*

As the meeting scatters into fragments of puzzlement and only partially abated concern, he feels calmly confident that he played his part well. His position in this assembly is now reinforced and cleansed of its tainting graffiti, as if he has been purged of witchery, or an unsightly stain on his suit has been skillfully erased by his silver tongue. One down and one to go. Den has arranged to talk to one of the researchers from the Supercomputing Center’s Crime Analysis Team. She has asked to see him, specially.

The walk through the UCSD campus is like visiting a tropical garden or zoo. It’s a far cry from the drizzle of London. The thought of focusing on his job does not hold much appeal here.

We should have held this meeting in London, he thinks. *How do people work here anyway?*

He reaches the sculpted oasis of shops and cafes. Lunch tables are lined up outdoors. Reddish green leaves hang from the spindly trees. He does not know what kind they are. The bustling of students and students hunched over fast food in this little crafted amphitheatre. They call to each other, chasing and flirting. He glances over at the UCSD book-shop. There is someone coming out. College kids, tossing around like imbeciles.

“Lord Jesus Christ fill your heart,” someone says, distracting him.

His mobile beeps. There is a message waiting for him from his virtual sister. She is his eyes and ears in the VR, but there’s no time for that now. He defers the message until later. Need to concentrate now. A meeting has been arranged. He is intrigued.

A slim Asian-looking woman steps out of the bookstore. There is something about her that attracts his attention. His trained eye can see something undefinable about her that is not attuned to the surroundings. She is as foreign to this place as he is. She returns his glance, raising an eyebrow. As she approaches, he sees that her face is youthful but has a distinctive gravitas. It gives her an oddly attractive quality that is both old and young at the same time, concealing perhaps some deep secret behind a veneer of youthful charm. He has no idea how old she might be.

He finds himself intrigued and immediately speculates about her. Rise as she approaches, to take a better look. They shake hands, a little too warmly for a first meeting. Her blouse is open slightly, revealing the beginning of the curve of her skin. Her smart, tightly fitting skirt makes light work for the rest of his imagination.

Her eyes are friends: they exude a feeling of recognition, as though he has just taken a look into her soul and emerged unscathed. She is a friend, but he is not sure how or why he knows. He is dazed slightly at this momentary immersion and has to pull himself back to the present. This is his weakness. He has always been a bit of a player, but never really in command.

"I am Den Morris," he says.

"Cathy Kim," she replies. She flashes him a flirtatious smile.

He looks around, expecting a larger group. "Is it just you?"

She nods. "You want a sub?" She fumbles in a shoulder bag for something paper-wrapped.

"A sub?"

"A submarine?"

She takes out a baguette wrapped in paper and he recalls that sub is a nickname for these long sandwiches. He laughs at the thought of someone carrying a submarine in their shoulder bag. Is it nuclear? "Well a whole sub is probably too much. Maybe just a small bathysphere. . ."

"Excuse me?"

"Never mind."

"You're good?"

"No. I'll take one."

She looks confused but smiles and hands him one of the oversized packages anyway. "Why don't we walk and talk, it's going to get pretty crowded here any minute."

He nods. "Lunch break for the students?"

"Exactly. Follow me."

She walks up the steps of the amphitheatre in front of him, giving him a prime view of her tight rear end as she shuffles up the steps. She is pretty hot, Den thinks. And she knows it.

Cathy Kim is not what he expected a computer researcher to look like. Somehow he expected to see black jeans and a tent of a T-shirt, sneakers and greasy hair. Either she is not really a researcher, she is administration or she is married. All of these things might be true, but the thing that keeps his attention, apart from her 'butt' is that she has an air of successful wealth about her. That means that this is a serious enquiry and there might be something in it for him.

They emerge from the amphitheatre onto a garden path that seems to run through the campus. "Let's go right", she says.

Den nods. "Ok. So you know, I'm intrigued."

She looks at him as they stroll. "Why I asked you to meet me?"

"Yes."

"I heard you talk today. It was good. You gave a good presentation."

"Thanks."

"You'd think that a marketing viewpoint would not be all that interesting to the research division of the game, wouldn't you? But actually, what you said was very interesting to me."

"What do you do?" he fishes, looking down on her. She is petite. Under her blouse he imagines a soft but ribby torso with tiny breasts. She is attractive.

"Well," she says. "Good question. I work on the flow security, of the social networks."

Den looks at her gormlessly. "Flow security of social networks. Social flow. What is that?"

For a moment she looks back calmly. "Well it's about channels of influence really. The game is this huge social network. In any network there are hundreds of channels of communication. All of the players can – at least in principle – send messages to anyone else. That allows them to generate implicit content that could be used to spread hidden messages, or simply to alter behaviour. To herd to people about. . .you know."

"What kinds of messages?"

"Well—your kind."

"My kind?"

"Like marketing. You deal in directed messaging."

"Right," he trails. "I must be tired. Jet lag."

"Would you rather put this off?"

"No, no. Go ahead. Sorry."

She smiles. "Well anyone could start their own advertising, mass messaging or soap box preaching, so there has to be some kind of security system that is looking for these intrusions. We call it intrusion detection."

"Intrusion detection?"

She cocks her head. "Yeah—it's a long story. Historical reasons."

"And you work on this detection?"

“Sort of. It’s a fully automatic system that is supposed to detect and stop obvious attempts at illegal message transmission. I just do research on the mechanisms. There are access lists, permission and all the usual kinds of security authorizations that decide who is allowed to do what. My interest is in the actual pattern identification.”

“So, now that the press has caught wind of this conspiracy story, some would say that your system is more important than ever.”

“Exactly. There is certainly a lot of interest in it from high up. At the same time, there is pressure from our sponsors to not completely eliminate the possibility for mass suggestion!” She sends a knowing look.

He nods, interested, but not sure where this is going. “Who are we talking about?”

“Where do we begin? All of the usual peddlers of filth: companies, governments. . .you know” She laughs. “The Christian and Jewish lobbies are never far away, and the soft drink companies have been looking at it. And, of course, the largest marketing companies for major corporations. Then there are government bodies. . .should I go on?”

“So the stories of government involvement are not so far from the truth.”

“Certainly, the U.S. government is involved. They have subsidised the American interest in this game to ensure our lead. That is just par for the course. He who controls the flow of messages in the game is powerful indeed. You can only imagine how many people want in.”

“I can certainly imagine, but . . .”

“But why am I bothering you with all this?”

He chuckles. “I was going to put it more subtly, but that’s about it, yes.”

She examines him through the corner of her eye with a serious intensity, but smiles as if he transmits a dampening signal to disarm him.

“I am interested in your methods.”

“How we identify interest groups for marketing?”

She grins. “Exactly. I am guessing that our jobs are not all that different. I was hoping we could discuss methods and perhaps come up with some kind of collaboration.”

“Heheh—I would love to just say yes, but I know we have some technologies based on search engine methodology that is proprietary. I can’t just say yes, not without running it past our board.”

“I understand that. But we could talk informally, and perhaps talk about what we could do with such a collaboration. My work is sponsored by several groups, but that doesn’t grant me any particular access to the actual data of the game.”

“All right.”

“Some of our research is for the F.B.I. and Interpol. They have an interest in the game from several perspectives. The point is that we need access to informa-

tion about what is going on in the game from other parts of the world too, from several different angles. Here in the U.S. law enforcement has access to anything it wants, but abroad there is only limited data to go on. ”

“You’re after intelligence? I don’t think our data would be useful for that.”

“Well, we’re after data. We are trying, amongst other things, to verify some claims that a group in Spain has put forward. It could be an important discovery that has security implications. I don’t know, of course, but I am guessing that your company’s unique mixture of marketing and analysis will allow me to see movements in the game by special interest groups.

“We need to be able to compare the patterns of usage in the game in other parts of the world with what is going on here, to see how it correlates with the information feeds. The more different data feeds we have access to, the easier it is to verify.”

“You’re hunting for terrorists,” Den translates.

She smiles. “Aren’t you the suspicious one?”

He shrugs and she laughs.

“That’s part of it. There are plenty of reasons for wanting to understand all these various channels of cause and effect. People are paying us to look into this, and law enforcement wants it to be able to follow behaviour in the game, because of all the private channels for communication. Possibilities for evasion.”

Den pauses on the path to think. The conversation is interesting enough, but, “Why me? I am not really one of the technical experts in the company.”

Kim turns to him. “I’m afraid that was my idea. I thought of you because I know that you have access to the roaming agents that your company has developed to pick up on trends in the game, and that you have the right kind of overview. Also, having listened to your talk – and having seen you in the flesh, so to speak. . .” She winks at him, sending a shot of adrenalin through his torso. “. . .you struck me as someone I could work with. An ally. We might even be able to help each other.”

Den nods at her, evenly. “Thank you. I’m flattered.”

“And there is something else I thought you could maybe help me with too.”

His sideways glance is a question mark.

“Apart from the fact that this story leaked out, there has been other stuff going on.”

“What do you mean?”

“I have been getting strange data,” she tells him. “I was wondering if you have heard of anything similar from the others involved.”

“What kind of data?”

“Glitches in the billboards. Sudden movements of players from centres of attraction.”

“What kind of glitches?”

She nods, chewing a bite of her sub. Swallowing, "Some of the directed imaging has not been working. Some of the content has been suppressed so we have had to work around it. The high profile regions that game sponsors want players to visit have been less visited lately. I thought that, since you are in the business of attracting people to those locations, you would have seen the trends. I mean, it seems as though there is actually a trend to it, a pattern. But I do not have all the tools to find out what it is."

"I haven't heard anything, but I can check it out. Maybe an error in the specification?"

She shakes her head. "The spec has been automatically verified. We have verified the rule set using the best methods. There is money for that kind of thing from the military. Always useful for something."

"Well. . ." Den's training has taught him that what technical people claim is definite and provable is often naive and only half the story. But he does not want to insult this fascinating woman. If he plays his cards right, he could be spending the rest of his visit in her company.

"At first we thought it might be a hacker. There are definitely hackers in there messing with stuff. But that cannot really explain it."

"So what can I do? I am just a package designer."

"The packages are the key modules. If they are not doing their jobs then our game is not paying for itself. These disruptions are a threat to your interest in the game too. We want you to be aware of this problem and find a safety net so that we can work around the disruptions."

"Isn't that a technological problem?"

"Well, that would be a partial solution. But security is mainly a human matter. You know, our sponsors are worried about this. There was a meeting last week at which one of our group made a big song and dance about how important this was. If we could solve this problem, they would like us a lot!"

"Enough to increase our fees?"

"Enough to make us the bee's knees, if you please!"

"I think I can do that," he nods, seeing possibilities.

"Good," she says, examining him more closely now. She pauses, as if considering whether or not to proceed. "Can I ask you a question?"

He nods. "Go ahead."

"I have a proposition for you."

He waits.

"Would you like to do me a personal favour?" She turns towards him, channelling her charm. If Den didn't know better, he would think she was trying to direct him. What the hell. "I might like that very much."

"You could be rewarded handsomely for your services." Her flirtation is scarcely concealed now.

“Well,” he says, turning to walk once again, putting his hand on her shoulder blade and letting it slide down to the small of her back. “What do you have in mind exactly?”

5

Dermot Macguire-Olsen’s small office is a collage of mess, a cellular equilibrium of multitudinous projects, tidied regularly but each possessing a life of its own and apparently prospering. His borrowed room at Oslo’s Computer Crime Team headquarters is more a testament to his productivity than to his humanity. It’s a sterile room, he realizes, like its occupant. He hasn’t added a single non-functional object to it since arriving: not a picture, nor a plant, not a shred of personality. *It’s a filing cabinet. Even my clothes are boring. Christ.*

Dermot is not even a real investigator. True, he’s been with the crime team for only a short time, but that’s not it. He has been telling himself repeatedly for years that he would change all this. If he can just establish himself – his credentials as a systems analyst, then he can relax a little and pay attention to these small details. When he no longer has to fight for the attention of his colleagues, then he can begin to reform his miserable social life. New clothes, new apartment, new lifestyle. But he knows that it is a race against time. He is not getting any younger. He has passed the awful barrier of thirty and the longer he waits the harder it will be to learn how to socialize again.

He looks around him, anywhere but at the monitor screen that has been giving him a headache these last hours. The only trace of personality in this office is his tea corner, he thinks. Dermot insists on making quality tea – none of this instant powder nonsense. He receives freshly roasted, fine-grain tea leaves of the highest quality from the Cameron Highlands. It is a perk of his company’s Malaysian outsourcing. It is the same tea that they serve at the Raffles. It is one of his few pleasures, apart from computer matters.

He gets up out of his seat and paces. It is better to get out of the chair once in a while. So they say. But where is he going? The only place worth being is in the computer. Jesus. How did it get to this? He does not feel quite at home here. He is hungry but nor can he quite bring himself to take any food from the

canteen.

“Aren’t you going to eat something?” a colleague asked him a while ago.

“I don’t know. Am I allowed to take this?” He does not yet feel as though he belongs here in this group. It seems foreign and he does not understand the system. Is it meant for him, an outsider?

He sits down again and looks at his combo. The screen-saver has cut in and is flagging him with one of the slogans he has programmed into it to boost his self-esteem.

BREAK FREE AND INDULGE!

BURN THE CANDLE AT BOTH ENDS!

He hits the keyboard to remove it and goes back to his job and starts poring over the code.

Dermot sees the code and admires the precision with which it has been executed. A lot of it comes from his day job, so to speak. That is why he is here. His company team is good, he thinks, partly due to his own influence. It compares well with the ugly, styleless hackery of the original fragments they received from the originators of the game. Then there is the code written in Asia—formal and proper, occasionally clever but mostly just slickly competent and drilled.

He picks up a piece of toast and chews absently on it, registering vaguely that it is not pizza. His combo signals an incoming voice message. He clicks in.

“Mr. Olsen?”

“Eh .. yes, what can I do for you?”

“My name is Ed Bishop. Am I disturbing you?”

“Uh no, go ahead.”

The voice continues. “You probably don’t know me yet. I am leading a research programme that is attached to your department. I have been travelling and have just arrived in town. I was wondering if I could have a word with you. I spoke to your department head and okayed it.”

Dermot is uncertain what to say. “Uhm. . .okay.” The caller ID looks legit’.

“I’ve been following your progress from afar.”

“Me? Why?”

“I’ll explain later. Look, it’s a nuisance for me to come out there. Could you meet me downtown in a while?”

“I . . .”

“I okayed it with your department head. And you’ll probably be going home soon anyway? It’s on your way.”

Dermot shrugs to himself. “Yes, I suppose so.”

“Good. I’m looking forward to meeting you. See you in an hour and a half?”

“I’ll ask my . . .”

“Good, see you then!”

The connection breaks.

Danielsen, his supervisor, has been loitering in the hallway. He sticks his head around the door. “So what did he say?”

“Some guy. You know him? He wants to meet me.”

“Bishop. He is a pretty important man. Smart fellow. It was he who suggested that we recruit you to begin with.”

“No one told me that.”

“It’s not important.”

“So I said I would go.”

“I think you should go.”

Dermot nods, thinking: break free and indulge.

“Then I’ll go.”

6

Marketing for the post 2000 information age is a complex business, Den thinks. Barraged with the incessant and the unprovoked, information becomes noise. Communicating a message is no longer a simple problem. It becomes a battle of wits, a matter of hacking the consumer. But consumers are receptive to the right things. If you package things correctly, they will not merely read messages, they will go out and buy the produce.

And it is all in the packaging. Lacking the time or inclination to contemplate, modern Man and Woman allows the media to serve its ready-digested morsels, regurgitated chunks of what passes for society’s official collective thinking. Why think for yourself, if someone else is paid to do it for you?

Media. Where any idiot can write a book on the correct way to go to the bathroom. . . Interactive television, or web. Even books. And mixed up in there, is the power to manipulate the passive mind: you are a monkey, I am the scientist, you choose what we decide. Just push the buttons in the right order and we’ll give you some sugar and tap your bank account. No, don’t speak, I am afraid that we do not permit language. Stick to the pre-programmed menus, you’ll be safer.

Den never questions the correctness of all of this. After all, he has been fed the same opinion menu as everyone else from birth. Besides, the challenge of manipulating people's thoughts is almost irresistible. The sheer audacity of it: the sheer power which an awareness of the strategy entailed. Thinking is now only a commodity for the masses, and creativity only for the elite.

He specializes in marketing the virtual reality. Not the electronic vision of imagined worlds, but the common variety which has arisen in the post war United States: the Disney land, car driving, hamburger eating buffer to Reality. The developed world hasn't experienced Reality for years: a Chinese meal is not a real Chinese meal, but a Safe Hong Kong Happy Meal which would not be too different from the Allowed Menu. Outdoors isn't safe. People drive everywhere, never experiencing real air on their faces, instead charging around the streets in a glorified video game, moving from air conditioned hallway to air conditioned hallway. And in the midst of this virtual reality is the need for New Things to satisfy a thirst for adventure. Of course it is precisely this marketing, choice-control strategy which has eliminated the possibility of adventure in the first place for most of the Flock, but Den is not worried by this. After all, it is the unattainable which we burn for: and that means that people will pay to achieve it.

"You'll burn in Hell for your job description," his virtual Chinese sister has told him with a wink. Mary Cheung is an artificial self-styled girl of the new millennium, with few hang ups. She occupies a different world to Den, an underground world of club reality which hardly does TV or Web. Den doesn't disapprove of his sister. In spite of her lack of conformity to conservative ideals, he finds her straightforward manner refreshing, after all of the trickery and subterfuge of the real office. That is why he made her.

She has left a message for him and has agreed to meet him, on a park bench in VLondon, where they can talk privately. Most of her reports are routine stuff, but every now and then there is a specific alert. In the privacy of his hotel room, he dons his glasses and hooks into the system with his mobile. After selecting his destination, his doorway opens into a side-street in downtown VLondon.

The side-street breathes with living surfaces, dominated by nano-slogans and URLs changing slowly so as not to disturb the balance of those trying to navigate. He takes a moment to acclimatize himself and then emerges into the main street. He has selected a privacy mode so that they will not be disturbed by others moving through the region. They will have this region to themselves, for the extra expense.

Up ahead is a small square park, with two benches overlooking a circle of grass. Low hedges provide a feeling of closure. As he arrives, she is already waiting, legs together, but outstretched to the pavement, leaning forward, dressed in the usual black gear which contrasts with the many coloured stripes in her

bleach-blond hair. A mini skirt over black tights, leather platform-boots up to her knees. It is not difficult to see her amongst the advertising; she is practically monochrome. She is wearing a fashion mask; it is a fragile spaghetti of fine dark wiring, affixed by some mysterious means which defies physics. Behind the wires, her Oriental features add a calm pool of beauty to the decorative distractions.

For the first time, Den finds it marginally disturbing that she has some of the traits of Cathy Kim. Perhaps it was prescience on his part. He is a man, after all, and not always in control of his fantasies.

“Hi.”

“Denny. Howz things?” She is always cool.

“Great. You?”

“Startlingly aware of the world around me. Otherwise fine.” She winks coyly and knowingly, suddenly reaching forward to brush something from her sculpted boots.

“Good. You called me. You have information.”

“I’ve been scouting, meeting people. ”

A Christian angel is hanging around, croaking its worn-out hymns and crawling on its belly in the street. It flaps its wings spasmodically, begging for Belief amongst the pigeons. It is almost impossible to exorcise these from private rooms. They have rights that few other characters in the game have. Den kicks an empty coke can at its blackened form, to shoo it away and sits down. Can’t escape the damned Christian missionaries, but his filters make them all look like shit.

“Tell me about the alarm.”

“I found an involvement of class one software corporation in online services. Alarm fourteen,”

She is true craftsmanship. Her diction is almost flawless.

“Okay, tell me more.”

She tosses her head slightly and looks up as she speaks, giving her a slightly bitchy edge, just right. “Street sellers in Bangkok are now offering portals for sex services using a new proprietary protocol. It has the signature of a class one. It seems to be tied to some special hardware. I’ve captured the signature for you.” She hands him a small ball, which is a representation of a data file. He stuffs it in his pocket for later, effectively transferring the file to his private storage.

“How many cases have you seen?”

She shrugs. “No established trend yet. It might just be a prototype in testing, but it was public. It was more of an anomaly event than a repeated signal.”

Interesting, Den thinks. A class one software company is a major player with a virtual monopoly interest. Why would they be involved in the sex trade? “Were there any unusual signs?”

"Well this is interesting," Mary says. "I managed to observe the stream from the second session I found. It was encrypted, but an analysis of the stream indicates an alphabet of about thirty characters, plus or minus ten percent. It could be Cyrillic or it could be Scandinavian."

"Not American? Even more interesting." He pauses to think and she waits with the defiant look of someone with an attitude. It is a feature that he requested long ago to make her more sexy.

"How many people using it?"

"Not many. it seems quite new. My guess is that it is just a prototype under development. Maybe some underground sex shop has been recruited to test it. It might be mainly local, and someone just happened to interface it into the game by accident."

He nods to himself. "Yes, that could be it. But if someone is making a new protocol then it means they have come up with some new hardware or software that they hope is going to win against the competition. See if you can find out more about it. How large is your contact graph?"

Mary pretends to be consulting her mobile. It is a visual trick that is useful for allowing time for informational searches in a plausible behavioural way. "I have just about ten probable nodes on it."

Den does not feel hopeful. If her web of contacts, related to this incident, is only ten nodes then it could take some time to follow sensible leads. Just as well this is not a high priority matter; but it is important enough to warrant an alarm from Mary Cheung. He makes a note on his own pad to remember this. "Okay," he says. "Remind me about this in one week, would you?"

"Roger dodger."

"Oh, and would you do me a favour? Find out whatever you can about a Cathy Kim, working at the Supercomputer Center here in San Diego."

"Someone you know?"

He nods. "Someone I just met."

She nudges him. "Interesting. Anyone I should know about?"

He laughs. "Not yet. Just find out who she is, what she does, something about her background. You know, the usual stuff." He pauses. "Mary, any other stuff you should tell me about?"

"Sure. I have a trend report. Increasing numbers of American players going to the Middle-East sims. They are probably kids, or at least juveniles. Behavioural patterns suggest an average mental age of sixteen on the U.K. scale. They are headed to the interfaced battles; you know, the ones that are tied into real military activity. A lot of prostitutes are moving into the area too, targeting them. They seem to originate from the Mid-East itself, especially Jordan."

"Figures." He runs through some notes on his mobile, imagining that he has already thought about this, but does not find a note. "What are these kids doing?"

“Some of them are just playing amongst the real action, for the thrill of having a game room in which the action is based on what they can see on the TV or web-cam. Others are actually helping the combatants in the U.S. and British Armies, either by hooking into the control systems and monitoring or by voting on targets.”

“Sheesh,” Den mutters. “These days there are more people voting in these reality things than vote in the fucking democracy.”

“Hey, sweetie, you know that the days of democracy are long gone out there.”

“What else?”

“A herd of Christian missionary succubi is now spreading through much of the game.”

He grunts.

“PhoxHollywood has started deploying robot fighters in the war regions that can be activated on the sim. Kids can basically fight for the Army within certain parameters.”

That’s right, he thinks. One of the Ivy League colleges built a system for them to work like a virtual machine with certain policy based constraints, so willing fighters can use their cognitive abilities to remote control certain slow robots. The army commanders can limit their capabilities. It was based on an old student project.

“The next level of gaming,”. Is someone sponsoring the advertising?

“I don’t know, but they are selling advertising on the control panels. I think the National Rifle Foundation might be involved.”

“That makes sense,” he notes. “And I can probably can find out on Sunday. They have an interest in the game already. Someone will be at the reception.”

Den glances at the time on his display. “Okay, honey. Anything else? I have to leave soon.”

“Not much. There is a new trend in group art that seems to be growing in importance in Germany and Eastern Europe.”

“What is group art?”

“Usually it is animated dance sequences with choreographed colour and music. It is usually a group activity, but the groups can be of any size. I have seen forty-seven projects of this kind in VBerlin alone in the last two weeks.”

“Potential?”

“Marketing category has not yet been established. I need more data to go on. The groups seem to be quite diverse. Think of Einstürzende Neubauten playing with a theatre group.”

“Go on.”

“No more significant trends above noise levels. Encounters. One possible recognition as a sim while listening on a private room, standard surveillance.

Two sexual encounters: one male business executive and one teenage boy. Nothing to report from the standard protocol.”

Den makes a note to review the protocol for handling sexual encounters. Possibly the questions and subtle trickery of the protocol is no longer effective in divulging the identities. “Was the boy genuine?”

“The responses indicated a behaviour consistent with a fifteen year old. He was just looking for a good time.”

Mary is programmed to engage with people whom she suspects might provide information about her mission objectives. Perhaps he should also program some more inhibitions into her.

“Okay, Mary, my sweet. What about background trends? How are the billboards working out?”

She pauses momentarily, as if the response time of the software is sluggish. “Not too bad, since you mention it. We are within our proposed margins of tolerance, although the anti-aging drug stuff is on the limits. It could be better.”

“Damn,” he mutters, and thinks: I hate that stuff. Imagine what it would be like if we all lived to be five hundred years old. People are already insufferably self-righteous when they are fifty!

“Society demands beauty, conformism, Denny.”

Youth is not just appearance, it's innocence.

He smiles now at his sister. He actually likes talking to her, even though he knows that her brain is scattered across the floor-space of a large underground cavern, somewhere in the Welsh mountainside.. “But you go against the grain all the time, girl..”

She sniggers with a big smile, sensing the change in conversation dynamic. “I go with whoever I want,” she laughs. “You know: ‘n’ the creed ‘n’ the colour and the name don’t matter. . . .

“Some of our competitors’ campaigns are doing well,” she adds. “S&S are making a fortune in returns on their political advertising. It’s all funded by big companies or sponsors. Of course it’s all a tax dodge. They seem to be able to support the funding of these campaigns to invest in future relief. I understand that the Chinese government has made advances to them to commission some work.”

“The Americans will never allow that,” he thinks aloud. “These old states have to break eventually.”

“My strategy analysis gives a sixty percent probability that flooding these areas with multiple messages is the optimal vector for breaking down the old propaganda in the populations.”

“Maybe they are not strong enough to defy the will of dogma. They are still the victims of the advertising of a bygone era.”

“Emphasis on bygone. The propaganda messages are no longer really effective. you know. It now seems to be a generational effect. Word of mouth, old prejudices, you know. Passed on from father to son, mother to daughter. Kids will believe anything.”

Den purses his lips, dislodging his glasses slightly and providing a disorienting tremor in the landscape from the orientation sensors. “Maybe we are crazy to be chasing these new techniques when the old ones are still winning out there.”

Mary looks him squarely in the eye now. “If I were you, I would embrace your little madnesses. That’s what makes you an individual. Everything else is just the collective myth of ‘what is Natural, what is Right, what is Normal’. Do you really want to be that much of a good doggie . . .do what we tell you because you are no different than we are? Says who!”

Well, she is doing her job, he thinks. If he ever needed reminding of how to do his company duty, Mary would be the one to remind him.

“One more report,” she adds. “A low-grade resource anomaly on the Dubai billboards, but it is spreading slowly. Is could be a systematic problem in its early stages.”

He nods and makes a note. “Right. Thanks, M.”, he says. “Now get back out there, girl. Do your thing.”

He pulls the plug on the simulation, suffering a momentary disorientation as the image vanishes. She is pretty good, he thinks, but not quite flawless yet. When he gets back to the U.K. he should arrange a meeting with the designers to make some adjustments .They should always be on the cutting edge.

He removes the glasses and rubs his eyes. It is dark outside now. He has been working for several hours and feels like going for a swim. He checks his list for the day and makes some notes. The swim will have to wait. He’d better check out this anomaly in VDubai first. If it is a sign of a problem, it could cost them.

He adjusts his navigation settings and reenters the simulation in downtown VDubai. This is a place of respite and luxury shopping where people meet to party and live a little Arabian fantasy. A thousand and one bites, someone called it. Better than a thousand and one fights. That would have to be Iraq.

Den homes in on the location of the billboard that Mary discovered. It is in a downtown market, in a small passageway amongst street sellers. There is a significant amount of detailing here in the backdrops. There are many characters wandering about in the market. Many of them are sims, but the rendering is pretty high quality. It costs to visit this part of the VR, so a lot of effort is placed on the perception of luxury. Den finds the billboard. It is a Persian carpet with a changing image, like a ‘nano-shirt’.

The billboard text is overlaid with something else. It looks like an error in the coding. The layers have gone wrong. Den reads the billboard. It says:

BUY THIS \$(enticement)EXAS WESTERN CAMPS.
FREE: DOUBLE SLOT ALLOCATION.
BARGAIN PRICES FOR TOTAL DEAL.

Obviously a coding error. When people see this, a small percentage will be drawn away to the Western fight camps in VTexas, just to see what they are. No one has authorized or paid for this. It needs to be fixed.

He checks his monitor channel. The scenery turns blue and fills slowly up with information about cause-effect relationships, current scheduling tasks and priorities.

The game is trying to reallocate some resources now. The intensity of the activity around the market and the nearby warring region has apparently become too much. Now, instead of denying access to the game, it is asking the players to move to a separate simulator where they can receive a different package. This peculiar error message is probably a by-product of that.

Den is no expert on the technicalities of the sims but he knows the kinds of failures that are common. Each of the processors is designed to implement a different package. The packages are different public relations programs, that work on different aspects of public awareness. This does not look like a normal error.

What is strange here is that all of the characters near by are running in minimal detail mode. They all look like ghostly apparitions, with no distinguishing marks. It is hardly the opulence that one would expect in Dubai.

As far as he understands it, the architecture is such that if one of the packages becomes so successful as to attract too many occupants, these processors become overloaded and one of two contingencies ensues. Either there is positive feedback and the package self-destructs and dies off, like a woolly mammoth. Or there is negative feedback regulation and it levels off to some stable equilibrium.

Now it seems that some of the regions are trying to regulate the flows. Den cannot exactly understand why though. It does not seem as though there is a significant load on this package processor. The Middle East has always been a favourite battle ground and is given a high processing capacity by Pentagon sponsorship, but lately there have been other attractors like the volcano rescue. It is almost as though one of the sensors is reporting incorrectly. He makes a note to submit a bug report to the programmer bug-tracking system. Within minutes it will be available to programmers all over the planet, probably in the Far East..

He begins to fear something that he has been expecting for some time. How long would it take hackers to get into the system? The game is supposed to be the most secure programming construct ever, built entirely using modern resistant methods, with fault tolerance and every kind of robustness feature. It hardly seems likely, but who knows?

Den keys in a request for communication on his virtual mobile and makes his report, noting the hidden ID of the billboard surface. He receives an immediate confirmation back, but something unnerves him about the error. His intuition bells are flapping restlessly. Perhaps he should call someone.

He keys in a message to the operations centre that watches over the system worldwide. He has spoken to people there before. They can at least investigate the problem.

"I have entered a bug report on the game. Here's the ref." He flashes the code. "There does not seem to be a good reason for the behaviour. My guess is that something is going wrong in the resource allocation."

"Yes, yes. That sounds strange. Well I don't know what it could be"

"So how do you want to deal with this?"

"Well, it looks as though someone has entered a report for it."

"Yes, I just told you I did."

"You did?"

"Yes, I just said that."

"Well, we'd better give them some time to look into it then."

"Perhaps you would let me know when you find out?"

"Well, we have a lot of temperamental artists working on the game. We try to keep them to a discipline, but you know how it is."

Den is not sure how to respond. "This might be urgent. If there is an attack in progress. . . Don't you have a procedure for handling this kind of thing?"

"I suppose we'll have to wait for a little artistic inspiration."

Artistic inspiration is bullshit, he thinks. You just have to fix this. There is no Aleph moment of Self-Realization when you have a flashing vision of a complete work of art. Only the flakes claim that. Ideas are vague. It's up to the professional to make them work. With hard graft.

7

Cold rain is pouring from the gutter lining the small canopy which protects him from an autumn deluge. Dermot has been waiting for almost half an hour; the chill wind, combined with the dampness, has penetrated to his bones. He shivers

and looks grumpily at his wrist strap. A tram rumbles past the cloister mall, grinding a metallic chime on the tracks as it takes the corner.

He watches a group of women coming out of the store across the road. Autumn fashions are on display. It interleaves a frantic effort to solve the problem in his head, the problem that he was wrenched from to come here. Why does he have to come here anyway? What's wrong with his office? Honestly, his mind is elsewhere, on a problem that has been consuming him for some time—a bug in the game that seems quite inexplicable. He knows of the expression “emergent phenomena” but this phenomenon is surely amongst the strangest to emerge in any system that he has known.

A van drives past, making a noisy flapping sound as the tyres cross the wet cobbles. It was not long ago that the government pedestrianised Oslo, but deliveries still get through as long as they are combustionless carriages. Strictly speaking, the van should not be allowed to display moving advertisements on its chassis, but people are always bending the rules.

Ten years ago, he would not have reacted to the noise of a van. For years they have covered up the meticulously laid cobble stones, which paved the streets of Oslo, pouring tarmac over them for the benefit of the motor car. Each year, the snow and frost crack and disintegrate the soft asphalt on the hard stone sitting atop Oslo's marshy foundation and the result is a lethal mess of pot-holes—an even worse surface to drive on than the stones themselves. Sometimes technology does not help us with our ailment, he thinks. Now they have begun to rediscover the interleaving dove-tail mosaics, weaving stonework in and out of surviving and resurrected tram-lines. Normal traffic is banned from the centre and replaced with trams, and electric busses equipped with all-weather tyres. Now even the smallest intrusion is conspicuous.

He shifts uncomfortably from foot to foot, annoyed that he was distracted from his work by so idle a thought. He does not feel that he has time to waste. Too many commitments to allow such petty observations to intrude on his time.

A man appears suddenly from nowhere, standing next to him.

“Mr. Crusoe, I presume? Or may I just call you Rob?” he smiles.

Dermot turns.

“Thank you for coming, Mr. Olsen.”

“Macguire-Olsen, Dermot,” Dermot corrects.

“Ah I'm sorry, Macguire-Olsen. You have mixed parents?”

Dermot nods, “A man and a woman.”

The man chuckles amicably. “Perhaps I can just call you Dermot.”

“Most people do.”

“And my name is Bishop, Ed Bishop.”

Dermot smiles skeptically. Bishop. This man was supposed to be an American, but he is clearly of Norwegian descent. Scandinavian eyes too big, too wide,

fearful with the panic of meeting someone. A face that does not look straight on, but snatches a glance here and there out of the corner of the eye. The wrinkles of apprehension around the forehead. These are distinctly Norwegian traits, Dermot thinks. He asks: "You are the man I spoke to, on voice-only?"

The man nods. "You look cold. Should we get a cup of coffee? I hear they have good cake here." His accent sounds American at least.

Dermot shivers and nods, clenching his sodden, numb fingers. He puts doubts on hold, to attend to the more urgent matter of getting dry and warm.

Something about the size of this man that lends him authority. He has the feel of a policeman or of the military, though nothing else about his appearance would suggest it. "All right."

They walk up the few steps into the cloister ring and push through the old wooden doorway into a café that has recently been crowded with after a rush. "Tea-room" hangs a sign, "Please look after your belongings. Thieves operate in this area.". The café is now almost empty, but is still littered with the remains of yet-to-be-collected cups and crockery.

"What about this table in the corner?"

He edges past the round dark-wood tables to a table with a window view of the cloisters, through rose-patterned iron-mongery. It is somewhat concealed behind a steep spiral staircase, also of wrought-iron, just about wide enough for a slender person to climb. The steps corkscrew up to a second level amongst the rafters of this old building; a sign hangs there: "Stairway to Heaven".

Up there, in the roofing, is a mezzanine level; small cherubs hang on strings from the ceiling, complementing ornate wood-carvings that are set into the stone wall. This stairwell is known as the most dangerous café staircase in the city. Sitting underneath it is asking for trouble, but there does not seem to be much choice. Dermot has seen glasses and drinks come crashing down as people get dizzy or simply try to carry too much.

He shivers in the warm room. Anticipation has taken hold of his physiology, but warmth has not yet nourished him. Nerves tingle, though he would not say that he felt nervous. When this man, Bishop his name, called him on an encrypted line and started cautiously picking his brains, he was not quite sure what to make of him. He is not even a hundred percent sure what he is doing here now. Something about what he said intrigued him.

"I don't usually do these kinds of meetings," Bishop says, as he squeezes his large frame into the wooden chair. "I am just a researcher. In charge of a project, yes, but still. But it turns out that my nephew was sick and I was going to have to come to Oslo anyway. It made a rationalization of my schedule possible, so here I am."

"You have family here then," Dermot digs.

“Yes. I grew up in the States but most of my family is here. What about you?”

“My mother is Irish. My dad was from the west of Norway.”

“Ah, and you grew up here?”

“Pretty much.”

Padlocked, ornate iron grills cover the windows; a floral design, in keeping with the style of the cloisters. There is a lot of iron here. It is a cage, but a cosy cage.

“So—what do they have to eat here?”

“I dunno. We can get a menu.”

“Let’s do that.” He turn around in his seat, looking for someone to ask. “No one seems to have seen us.”

“They’ll come.”

“Yes, I expect so. Are you hungry? I would like something. . .” He looks conspicuously around some more.

Dermot feels awkward, wishing they could just get on with the matter at hand.

“Actually, I am wondering why we are here.”

“Yes, yes, of course.” Bishop meets his gaze. “I’m sorry. I spend so much time working on these projects that it’s easy to forget that no one else knows what I actually do!” He laughs in a careful way and pauses as if to reign himself in again. “Ok.” Bishop reaches into his pocket and pulls out a small slate mobile. He thumbs in a short sequence and transmits his ID to Dermot’s mobile by direct link. It beeps in confirmation. Dermot glances at his wrist strap and touches it to see the confirmation of identity. It is marked with the official Norwegian and European police logos and signatures.

He nods. “Thanks.”

“So now you know who I am, let’s get down to business.” He sends a glance towards one of the serving staff. “Let me ask you, Dermot. How much do you actually know about the game you are working on?”

Dermot shrugs. “Depends on what you mean. I know the code pretty well in chunks. I am not into all the details, but I have to know enough. I could put together another program like it if I had the resources. If that is what you mean?”

“No, that’s not what I had in mind.”

He stops as a waitress arrives to take their order. They look at each other expectantly. “Eh perhaps you would bring us a menu,” he says to the girl.

“I’ll just have a coke,” Dermot says promptly, snatching a frustrated glance at her. She is wearing a the tightly fitting black uniform. He feels momentarily annoyed with himself again for being distracted.

The man, Bishop, or whatever his name is, falters and says, “Ok, just bring me a coffee and a piece of cake.”

"What kind of cake would you like? We have cheesecake, carrot cake, choc. . ."

"Chocolate sounds perfect," he says, smiling at her.

Dermot admires the way he captures her attention, looking at her full-on. He wishes that he could get someone's attention like that. He feels anonymous, as usual.

"Okay. And that's a regular coffee?"

"Yes, thank you."

"Fine," she chirps, flashes him a smile, and swings around to hurry back to the kitchen bar.

Bishop, or whatever he's called, turns back to face Dermot and continues. "Where were we? Yes. Do you understand the true nature of the game?"

"What do you mean?"

"I mean that the game, as you know it, is not just a game. That is one of the reasons why we are investigating it, and following its development. Of course it is much more than just a game. It is a whole environment. It mixes play with chat and with advertising and politics. It is a game with a hidden agenda. It is a meeting place, a shopping mall, you name it."

"What kind of agenda?"

"You don't know? You haven't thought about it?"

"Well, no," he says, feeling a little put out. "I might be a little behind, I suppose. I've only been here for a couple of months. I am still looking at the security and privacy coding. My job is. . ."

"I know what your job is. And what it is going to be." He adds: "I was the one who got you on the team. We need your expertise."

"I heard that."

"And you probably wonder why."

Dermot nods.

"Well, it is a long story, if we go into details. Let's just say the cat is out of the bag as far as the game is concerned."

"You mean . . . its agenda?"

"Exactly."

"So what is it?"

"Well, that is a bit like asking: what is the agenda of politics. It is a new meeting place. A place where people come together and interact, free of these social groupings that bind social groups in reality."

"It's a game though."

Bishop nods patiently. "Have you heard of the Wilkinson report?"

Dermot searches his memory for something, staring into the dark wood-grain of their little table. "Wasn't it something to do with the role of the police in the coming decade? I think I saw a documentary about it."

“Yes it was,” he says, clearly impressed. “It was a report that was written in summary of a conference between the United States and the European Union police forces, some years ago. Basically it says that what we see going on today is a fundamental fragmentation of society caused by communications privacy.”

“Yeah.. Yeah. I think I remember.”

“Do you remember the content?”

He shrugs.

“Well, some of what the report says is just sour grapes for not getting their way with surveillance laws, all those years ago—you know, when mobile technologies were new. The rest of it is a rather insightful analysis of our social condition and the breakdown of law and order.”

Dermot waits for explanation. His eyes roam and he is impressed by the detailing of the room. Wooden carvings, floral iron-mongery. It belongs to a different age. The recursion and repetition of pattern makes it look like a piece of computer code. Perhaps we are all living inside someone else’s simulation, he thinks. Kudos to the programmer.

“All right. So the bottom line is that police forces around the world are worried that they might be losing their grip. The idea is that the society is fragmenting because people are giving priority to conversations with close associates, rather than to those around them. You see, before we had all of these devices for modern electronic telepathy, the limitations of physical contact were, in a sense, actually beneficial in mixing people up. Society is basically like a colloid – a mixture of liquids that do not want to mix. You have to keep mixing it, or else little globules groups will form that do not mix in and one has a multi-dimensional apartheid; not just blacks and whites, but every imaginable social distinction forming their own sub-cultures.”

“I suppose so. So what?”

“Oh! We can see it happening. If you study anthropology, you find that humans are wired for social groups that are about thirty strong.”

Dermot believes he has read something like that.

“We can maintain an acquaintance list of about a hundred friends and relatives, but our tolerance level for close contact is around thirty. The trouble is that our mobiles have put us in touch with a much larger number than that, and so people are starting to be more selective in who they talk to. Not only that, but they can have private conversations that are not really bound to a physical reality where you get all those important physical signals that tell you when you are doing something wrong.”

“No body language.”

“No body language—and no moderation. If you can dial up just those people who agree with you, and keep out those who don’t, then there is no moderating

influence on your opinions.” He pauses to see if Dermot is comprehending him. “People become extremists.”

Again, he pauses, looking at Dermot to see if he is following.

“You see, society is dependent on mixing. Humans only form a broad consensus of opinion if they meet and mix, and knock off each other’s rough edges, criticize each other, exchange disparate viewpoints, spar — and that is the basis of civil society. We summarize all of our agreed codes of conduct as The Law, and we serve it to the Police to enforce. If you don’t keep stirring the colloid, it splits up into globules again and the police forces of the world are just floating around in the carrier liquid, unable to penetrate the globules.. Society has been splitting up into a tribal globules for several years now, because we do not meet each other in the same way as before.”

“Because of mobiles? You think that is really true?”

“I know it. Even when we meet in public, we are really somewhere else, talking to someone on the end of a little armoured communications pipe that no one can listen to. No one can interrupt us, edit us, and say—hey, you’re full of shit. People do not police one another any more, because of the sheer volume of communication. Police forces are on the defensive, whereas society demands a kind of offensive moderation.”

He shrugs. “I don’t get it.”

Bishop becomes suddenly stern. “Society is breaking up, Dermot. The world over. It is worst in the U.S., but we see it happening here too. The police forces of the world are there to enforce a social consensus, a set of laws that summarize our basic tenets of society. But that law has to reflect the opinions of the majority, otherwise it cannot be enforced. People are creating their own splinter groups, with their own laws. That’s great news for organized crime. It is great news for corruption. It is bad news for social stability and democracy.”

“Isn’t it more democracy? I mean if people do more like they want to?”

“No, that is libertarianism, or anarchy even. In a democracy, you agree to disagree, and then you abide by the majority’s wishes.”

Dermot shifts uncomfortably now. “So I joined the crime team because I was interested in the security of commercial services in the game. I am not sure what you are telling me now. It sounds kind of like disaster scenario science fiction.”

Bishop stares at him for a moment as if marshalling his thoughts. Dermot cannot quite look him in the eyes. Wide penetrating eyes, full of worry. Norwegian eyes.

He looks at the stairwell beside them, to avoid them; rose patterns swirl in the iron-work of the spiral steps. Details. They say that God – or was it the devil? – is in those details.

“Yes, you did,” Bishop says finally, as if picking a new strategy. “But what I am asking you to do is to step back from that for a moment and see something

bigger that is going on, under the obvious surface. Forget about the superficial mechanics of your job, and get philosophical for a moment. That is my job.” He laughs ironically. “I suppose police forces are not famous for being philosophical. But we have had to adapt these last ten years.”

“Yeah.”

“Do you know that we started university training and research, to try to get to grips with the changes? That was years ago. That’s my job – or how it started. I don’t think too many people know how the police works. You can’t make a TV show about our work, so no one has been fed a romanticized version. Don’t be confused. We are just regular police—nothing covert or underhanded. But the world’s police forces have come to the understanding that we have to change our *modus operandi* somewhat. The distinction between crime and normal behaviour is being eroded. We need to think again.”

“It sounds kind of scary.”

“And it is. Trust me. It is.”

They look at each other for a moment in silence, as if examining one another for signs that this is all some kind of joke. Has someone at the department put Bishop up to this? Will the hidden cameras suddenly appear, amidst a lot of forced laughter? Well, Mr. Macguire-Olsen, we have murdered your family on national television, but it was all in the best possible fun—and the ratings were excellent. So now we should all laugh about it, in the name of television entertainment.

Or is this a rite of passage for him working with the crime team? A ritual humiliation? A test? Entry to the Freemasons? Dermot feels as though his head is spinning.

The waitress returns with a tray and begins to unload their goods. The timing is good; Dermot uses the opportunity to get a reality check. Bishop arranges his coffee and cake on the table in front of him, but does not touch them.

“So,” Bishop says. “All right. Let me put it this way. You must have seen the rioting and unrest in the United States in the news?”

He nods. “Yes.”

“Good. Well, the media is telling us that this is all very unexpected and radical. What do you think?”

Dermot shrugs.

“I am suggesting to you that this is not all that unexpected. The Wilkinson report predicted this kind of social breakdown some time ago. There is a loss of governmental authority, and therefore a loss of the authority that goes with the institutions of state; the law courts, the police, and so on. It is worst in the U.S., because American corporate culture has long been the driving force for its politics there. America’s ruling class is basically a conglomeration of multi-national, rich people who have their own agendas. They were further along the

path than anyone else. But we are not far behind them. This is an outgrowth of that.

“What makes it unsavoury to them is that mobile communications have moved power back to the little guy. You no longer have to be rich to be powerful to be in control, you just need to be well connected to your target audience.”

“Everyone has a mobile,” Dermot adds absently.

“And everyone has their own private chat rooms, with encrypted channels that even the N.S.A. or G.C.H.Q. cannot crack in real-time.”

“And there is no mixing in these private rooms.”

“Yes! Exactly!” Bishop seems elated that Dermot has passed his little intelligence test. “Not only that, but the currency of the little guy is not money. He or she speaks a different language. Other things are important. This is all very disturbing to the political big-cats, who have their own traditions. The governments and so on. Even when there has been corporate corruption in the past, there has been enough consensus in society to hold the governmental power base of these rich people and keep the country together, because the basic illusion was focused around a single centre of power. But as time goes on there is a fragmentation from the grass roots level. In the U.S. you have the Bible Belt and the East coast and the West coast and the Rifle Association and . . . you name it. Every little group with its own agenda is asserting its independence. Every group, that does not see its personal hobby-horse being represented by traditional society at large, is looking for a piece of the action.”

Dermot begins to see his point. “I think this is just a classic management problem. I mean, it’s just like computers, isn’t it? When you decentralize your system, you have to accept a different kind of uncertainty in the model. Society has to agree on a common operating system in order to integrate into one big computer program. You are saying that people are choosing their own operating systems that are not compatible, so it is becoming hard to manage the diversity.”

Bishop smiles. “Yes, I suppose that is a fair analogy. You are the computer expert. That’s why I need you. Though it’s a bit more complicated when fragmentation leads to hatred and separatism. Democracy can’t function without a high level of mutual understanding.”

Dermot stares, and finding nothing to add, begins: “So it seems to me that you have two choices.”

“Go on,” Bishop concedes, nodding to the table.

“Either you split up society into distributed pieces, with local autonomy and weak cooperation with a few ties, or you fight to win back integration with centralized management.”

“Yes.” Bishop seems pleased. “We can make every little group into a virtual country, with its own laws and customs. That is fine in the virtual world, but we cannot forget about the good old-fashioned physical world. There’s trade.

Interdependence of supply chains. No country can be an island physically, no matter how politically separatist it's become. There is still the matter of the law. Local and international. What is its role now? Surely even computers have to agree on some common rules of play when they share public spaces?"

Dermot nods, slowly, tuning into the idea now that he can put it into a framework that he understands. "That's true. There are protocols that handle that kind of thing."

"Good. Protocol sounds like something that I can understand. But are these protocols cooperative or aggressive in nature? Do people end up in civil society, or in mortal combat?"

Dermot nods to show his understanding of the question.

"And what are the police forces to do? Are they part of this protocol? Whose rules should they follow? In a sense, they are following an outdated set of ideals. They stand for the old centralized power model, where rich people decide what is right and wrong—in other words, what others are rebelling against."

"Same answer. Either you adapt, or fight back."

"Yes. But you know, it is actually becoming dangerous for law enforcement officers to intervene. There is an increase in the amount of crime that is operating in these closed globules. If the whole of society opposes the police, it's the end of society. It is a kind of multi-mafia culture gone mad. Law enforcement only works if people really want it to. Police tend to be the first institution people mistrust—a target of even more hatred."

Dermot takes hold of a paper napkin and chews his cheek. He looks back at Bishop and takes a breath. "Ok. So everything is going to hell. What are our chances of surviving before global warming kills us? Why are we here?"

Bishop nods and finally looks down at his prize. Dermot watches the man dig into his piece of cake. The cake stands proudly as a dark brown wedge, like a ship's bow breaking into a criss-cross wave pattern, made of some kind of coloured fruit purée. It has a perfect sector form, almost too perfect to disturb. As he attacks it, it begins to fall apart, leaving smears of chocolate on the plate, destroying the beauty of its virgin birth.

"Why are we here?" Bishop repeats, with a mouth full of cake. "Hmmm! This is good." He chews more and swallows. Obviously, he is going to make him wait. "You and I are here," he says, "because of the Game."

Dermot feels a twinge of relief at the mention of the Game. He was beginning to think that he had lost contact with the real world. Perhaps he was dreaming. At least the Game is something that he knows something about.

Bishop takes a sip of his coffee and summons himself. "All right. So society is breaking into small pieces. Big government's days could be over. Why? Because no one thinks they need anyone else. The only thing they have to exchange with people they don't like is money. How do you convince people to get

back together again? To regroup and fall into line, around common ideals?"

Dermot shrugs, summoning no expression on his face.

"The Game is such an opportunity. It is actually a great idea. A shrewd move, you might say. By people in former positions of power to consolidate that disintegrating power."

Dermot was half expecting something like this. He snorts. "I knew it couldn't be just a game."

"Well, yes it is a game, in one sense of the word. Just as it is a chat room and virtual reality meeting place for multilingual cultures. But that is just what it is—not what it is for."

"And you are saying it has a purpose that goes beyond philanthropy."

Bishop almost spits his coffee out. "Philanthropy!" He laughs. "I'm sorry. I'm sorry. I don't mean to mock. I suppose it is good that you can still believe in such things. I wish I could. Yes. I am saying it is not about philanthropy."

"It's free for use, if you have the gear? It brings people together. Isn't that philanthropy?"

Bishop nods, his eyebrows high, his eyes wide. "Oh sure, if free parking at the shopping mall is philanthropy. To make the horse drink, you first have to bring it to water."

"No, not a horse. You're saying it's a big spider's web for governments."

"I like that!" Bishop laughs, and stuffs more cake into his mouth.

Dermot is with him now and is feeling more confident. "But what is it that governments want the players to do in the game? There is not that much to do there except engage in these fantasies, or in conversations, or in tourist trips around the globe."

"Propaganda."

Dermot stops to think. "Propaganda?"

Bishop puts down his fork and washes down with a sip of coffee. "Society's traditional law-givers are rebelling back. They are fighting for their survival. If society wants to regroup in a virtual world of private communication, they need to supply an attractive reason to bring them together again. The game is not only such a place. It is an environment over which the major investors have complete control.

"Now you might say: why do we need governments? If we can get along fine without them. . . Well, there is the global economy which actually supports our society far more than people realize. Countries are not independent anymore. Society has specialized to the point at which small groups cannot be self-sufficient. People actually need each other to survive. Could you grow enough food in your garden to survive? I am guessing you wouldn't have a clue how to do it. You rely on getting your food from a shop. The shop gets its produce from some market garden in the Netherlands, or a dairy in Denmark. Our whole society is based on

the integration of specialization. It is too complex for any one person or group to master each of the skills that is needed to survive. We are not like the Amish. So, in fact, whether people know it or not—whether they like it or not, they need each other. We cannot just abandon this infra-structure that we have set up over thousands of years. Our lifestyle would collapse eventually.”

“But, you make it sound like the world could end tomorrow. Surely this is a long way off? We must be talking years, decades?”

“I doubt it. It is much easier to destroy something than it is to build it. All you need to bring chaos to the world is to switch off the power for a week. You will bring about wide scale disorder. If people don’t have someone to tell them what to do, many of them will perish or become violent. But we digress.”

“Okay.”

“So the game is an opportunity. Rich people have been rich fortuitously, by virtue of who they are, or by being in the right place at the right time. But society is changing so that they are no longer seen as the icons of our society. So we are scaling back to who-you-know relationships. The amount of complexity in society is governed to a large extent by how much people are in communication. How much they tell each other things, who they’re talking to. But information has reached a critical mass. Everything just looks like noise, so no one can see the leaders and hence they look to smaller groups they can understand. Hence the fragmentation.”

“Okay, so let’s say I believe you. What about the game?”

“The game is meant to attract people into a place where they, once again, of their own free will, can be bombarded by propaganda. The idea was originally proposed by the U.S. government, but they realized quite soon that they could not do it without the cooperation of others.”

“Typical. . .”

“You see, you cannot just have one country with a stable government. There is civil society amongst humans, but there is also the society of nations and governments. Cooperation is a very intertwined thing. If you want to be cynical about it, you could say that the reason society works is that we all manage to brainwash each other into the same mind-set.”

“That sounds pretty conspiratorial.”

“Not really. Only the way I have put it now. Societies have always been this way. It doesn’t really matter what the consensus is, as long as there is one. Our whole world is based on the idea that we share the same illusions – or delusions, if you like. But global communications mean that we meet each other, like it or not, so we have better agree on the rules of engagement. On morality. All of these mind-sets have to meet at the edges. The room for multiplicity is shrinking, because we are increasingly dependent on one another’s specializations.”

“All right. So what can I do? What is it you want from me?”

"I want your help to understand how we can use the game's propaganda methods ourselves. I want to know if it is possible to put something into the code of the game that can help the police. The kind of little something that can change the very fabric of society to fight crime by changing people's attitudes again. You see, the game consortium has one agenda which is to bring the world back under the wing of the U.S. government and its corporate sponsors. But, while the strategy is smart, the idea is morally corrupt. It is not law and order they want, but obedience, passive obedience."

"So you think the game is already corrupt."

"Of course it is. All systems are corrupt."

"Isn't that a pretty serious accusation?"

"It's too common to be serious. Dermot. But it is worth keeping an eye on. It's like noticing there is mold on your cheese. As long as it is only a little, you don't care—you expect it and it just tastes interesting. It is not until it starts to eat into the bulk of the cheese that it becomes a problem."

"I am not sure I like your view of the world," Dermot mumbles, rubbing his eyes. "I mean, I knew there was bad stuff going on out there when I joined the crime team, but this whole conspiracy, corruption thing. . ."

"The child pornography rings that your team investigates are just one tiny part of what is going on. We work openly on that, because most people still agree that is a pathology of our society. But it is only one flavour of corruption." He gestures up to the rafters as if waving to the cherubs. "Corruption begins with little things: oh, you know this is only a teeny little bending of the rules, it can't possibly matter to anyone. Then gradually tolerance grows and the transgressions become bigger and bigger, like your body learning to tolerate certain viruses and bacteria. All systems have corruption, just as all organisms have disease, because it is a natural function of the environment to test out every little rule of order that we try to enforce. It is a natural body-function of society, if you like. That's why we have police forces and immune systems."

"But if everything is corrupt, what can we do?"

Bishop is relentless and goes back on the offensive. "Suppose you want to root out corruption in a system. How do you do it?"

Dermot does not bother to answer.

"You cannot report it to the authorities, because they are probably corrupt too. You cannot tell your friend—he cannot do any more than you can. You have to be more subtle. You have to change people's perceptions of their situation over time, so that they do not know it is happening. It has to be subliminal, inescapable. Slowly people have to start to believe that they always thought differently and that it is only their stupid parents who were stuck in the past. It happens on the time scale of generations, by persistent plugging. Take the environment as an example. Take genetic modifications as an example. How do

you steer those changes? Hire activist groups?"

"Forgive me, I am somewhat tired."

"Bear with me, Dermot. I want you to understand what we believe is going on in the software you are investigating. We are talking about activism at the level of governments, and we now are talking about counter-activism at the level of the police. For the good of society."

"Look, are you sure that you haven't confused me with someone else?"

"I am sure. This is my job. This is what I do."

"But my task was just to look for hidden communication channels for child pornography. It's part of the law here in Norway that software has to satisfy certain ethical guidelines. . ."

"I understand all that," he says, patiently. "What you need to understand is that there are already powerful forces deployed to control people's ideas. The game's war-zone tourism in Iraq is targeted at the American rural male audience. The sex tourism of the Far East is aimed at central European males. The beauty pageants and adventure scenarios are aimed at bored housewives. . . And then there is the religious stuff. You get the idea? "

"I get it. I need to go home. Tell me what you want."

He pauses, nods and pushes his chair back. "I'll tell you in a moment. First I have to visit the washroom."

Dermot expires a fatigued breath. "Go down to the other end, and it's down another spiral staircase. You need to collect a key at the bar."

Bishop purses his lips. "They run a tight ship here."

"It's to keep the down-and-outs out of the washrooms."

He looks out of the window as Bishop strides off. There are beggars all around here. He knows that it is illegal to beg in Norway, but that has never stopped them down here in the centre of town. Sad to see people like this, on the edge of society. Is this what Bishop is talking about? Will society fragment so that everyone is on the edge?

The café is starting to fill up again, but in dribs and drabs; not like the evening rush, still to come. Dermot is feeling warm now, and un-zips his anorak.

What an enigma Bishop is. He has that Scandinavian look of reservation about him, but an almost American self-confidence. When he speaks, he talks as if he has known all this for years. If that is the case, why hasn't anyone else heard about it? Or am I just so out of touch, stuck in my work? And then there is the American accent. Why would he be laying in to the U.S. if he comes from there? It takes several minutes before Bishop comes back. His hands are wet and he has dirt under his thumbnail.

"How are we doing?" Bishop asks. "Do we need more to drink?"

Dermot shakes his head, then remembers his manners. "No thank-you." I have been in Norway too long, he thinks. His mother would have shouted at him

for such Scandinavian contempt for manners.

“Ok.” He signals to the waitress for more coffee and seats himself again, almost knocking his head on the spiral staircase. “So, Dermot, what do you think? Are you interested in helping me? I really need your help.”

He looks Bishop in the eyes now. “I still don’t know what it is I am supposed to do. What you want me to do.”

Bishop grins. “Oh nothing much. Just change society – you know, as you do.” He chuckles and Dermot smiles in spite of himself. “We need to look for patterns first. I have some unusual leads that I’ll pass on to you tomorrow, but we can leave the details for another time. I think we are both tired and it is good to chat.”

No, Dermot thinks. You’re not getting away with it that easily. “How do we change society? How can I do anything? I don’t even work for the game company anymore.”

“Yes you do. You are on loan to us. You still have connections.”

“But I don’t write the code anymore.”

Bishop stares at him, as if considering his strategy.

“All right. So we need to start a propaganda war of our own, on behalf of civil society. And we need a strategy. I have some ideas on that which come from an unusual source.”

Dermot lifts his eyebrows. “Okay.”

“But think, Dermot. What do you do with a society? You see those down and outs?” He points out of the window, across the street to where a single man is sitting with a paper cup. “What do you do to avoid people like this in society? What are we doing wrong? Could we educate them better, to stop them from dropping out? Is it genetic or memetic? Nature or nurture? What part of the inclusive society has failed? Or, are we flogging a dead horse? Perhaps it is too naive to think that one single model of society can cover everyone’s needs. So should we perhaps segregate them entirely? How do you control undesirable elements?”

“I’ve never really thought about it.” Dermot finds the idea fascinating but is somewhat uncomfortable not being able to contribute to the conversation.

“Suppose we try to fix it by having two models. Is that then the same a class based society? Is it immoral? Or a caste system that socialism has been fighting all these years? Or is this something entirely new in our society that has never before existed—a product of our new technological, knowledge-based lifestyle?”

“You mean like that *Time Machine* H.G. Wells movie or *Metropolis*?”

“The Morlocks and the Eloi, yes, you’re right. That is a kind of segregation. South Africa has a its own kind. The U.S. has had its kinds. The caste systems of India. . . we have always had this kind of fragmentation. But I don’t think that explains why these down and outs have fallen mainly into the welcoming

hands of an exploitive chemical industry that's hell bent on milking them of their dignity. Opting out of society is not the same as segregating it into classes. No, we need something that makes people want to mix. Even castes mix, even if only to shovel contempt at one another. They create a system that works, but it is not usually democratic."

"And you think we can change people's minds by serving them some kind of go-help-your-country propaganda?"

Bishop laughs. "Did you know that the USIA and its children has been broadcasting American propaganda for years? Actually, since the second world war. There is no difference now, but it's just that a certain population of users is getting smart at finding out stuff independently using our modern information resources. When America invaded Vietnam or Iraq, for instance, it was proactive defence. You can make anything into anything else, just by messing with people's heads. It's all about the information."

Bishop receives hot coffee and takes a sip.

"In your code, I think you will find features that will allow the game consortium to direct advertising content, but that is not what it is for. Advertising here is propaganda. They might sell some of the space to commerce, but the main aim of the space is to reintegrate the factions"

"I suppose it depends who pays for it and what they are saying."

"Maybe. What interests me is how well propaganda works. And don't think that you will always notice the obvious message. Suppose, for instance, I want to start a conspiracy theory that implicates . . . say . . . the North Koreans or the Middle East in something diabolical. Suppose I suggest that there is evidence that my father died of toxins related to the genetically mutated species following the Chernobyl disaster. How do I do it?"

Dermot shifts uncomfortably. "Why do I get the feeling that you already know the answer?"

He smiles. "Well, I don't go to the newspapers and start making Weekly World News headline allegations. I need to be more subtle."

"You start a rumour. Get people talking about it."

"Yes! That would be one way. Another way is to advertise."

"Advertise?"

"Yes. Regular marketing. It sounds trite, but if you bombard a sufficient number of people with suggestions often enough and in sufficient volume it will change their basic belief system. That is what advertisers are trying to do all the time. Vitamins in your shampoo, whiter-than-white antacid stuff in chewing gum, you know.

"This is all standard stuff. Western propaganda does not work like the old communist propaganda or the dictatorships in the Middle East. It's more subtle than that. Until recently, at least, there has already been a culture of so

much passivity and consensus that you barely need to try to convince people any more. Keep them fed, give them tele-entertainment and fill them with unimportant sports and lifestyle issues and they stop caring about anything else. So when it comes to larger issues, everyone already has the same basic mind-set and you don't have to try to get a consensus. You just tell people what they should think and they are more or less happy to go along with it. One or two folks are going to develop an independent mind of their own – but they are minor anomalies that can be ridiculed or taken out. This is how Western society works.”

“That’s what you meant about consensus.”

“That’s what I meant. To create a society, we have to manufacture some kind of consensus. In other words, that is what society was all about in the first place: coming together on a common agreement so that people can specialize and develop skills that go beyond what anyone could afford to do if he or she was not sheltered by a group.”

“I thought societies formed around religious worship.”

“Good point. But that is the purpose of religion, isn’t it? It is a form of mind-control for civil uniformity. It is a primitive form of politics that uses people’s basic fears to manipulate them. Religion and spirituality are two different things.”

“Yeah, I always thought that too.”

“Then there is the counter belief that, if you leave peoples to themselves they will gradually gravitate into masses of uniform opinion. Thing is, then they have all fallen into the trap and you can start to manipulate them less subtly, to gain power, by changing the collective attitude to whatever you please. People buy into the consensus because people do not want to stand out.”

“Wait – there is no consensus in religion.”

“Of course there is. All religions play on the same basic fears. The fear of dying, the fear of loneliness, of sickness. By joining the club, grief has been transformed to fulfilment, loneliness to relief and even happiness. The wound of solitude has been healed.”

What do you know about loneliness, Dermot thinks. He jibes, “Wow. This is what religion does for you? Sounds good.”

“Religion is an all purpose monkey wrench, an adjustable spanner, a skeleton key which pushes the right buttons and seems to replace the intended need with an artificial one: a belief in an abstract love. It is the ultimate advertising slogan. Fill any hole. We will make our product your solution, no matter what your weakness. We are so damned good!”

“But it is present all over the world. There might be something to it.”

“Does it not tell you something that the distribution of religions in the world is *geographical*? No, Dermot. It spreads like a virus, just like any form of politics or hearsay.”

“So is it a good thing or a bad thing, this control?”

“Ah, finally. This is the interesting question: the moral question. People are wired to be social creatures. That means that we want to agree with our neighbours. We want to homogenize. That is the key weapon that allows us to be manipulated by the righteous and the ruthless. So, yes, we want to belong to a group, but we also want to belong to a safe group that places the needs of the many before the needs of a few rich executives, or extremists.”

“And what does the crime team do about it?”

“We follow the development of the prevalent dogmas now. They are usually associated closely with organized crime and exploitation. Some with religion, and the above. . . . But it is all getting much worse, and we are falling behind. There are more competing ‘religions’ than ever.”

“Maybe that is good – you know like keeping lots of the bacteria in your stomach healthy to prevent the ulcer variety from growing too powerful.”

Bishop laughs drily. “I like it. That is one way of looking at it. Unfortunately, those who are most malignant will tend to dominate. But don’t get me wrong, there are plenty of powerful messages from the law too. As a police force, it is not our job to decide which are right or wrong, only which are counter to society, or which foster crime. But we see the need for a counter-strike on the the propaganda front.”

Dermot nods.

“The project you are working on is part of the indoctrination introduced by the U.S. and other governments to consolidate its control over society, but it is now under attack. It was only a matter of time, of course. The economic model does not always lead to quality. . . only competition.”

“You lost me,” he grumbles.

“The contract was sold to a number of contractors, but the tendrils of corruption go deep. Evangelist churches in the U.S. see the spread of this game as an opportunity to hijack the indoctrination process for their own aims. America is really a test case. It is a prime example of what happens when a culture dumbs down in a process of fear and dependency over generations. Everything becomes simplistic. The media has a simple edge detection algorithm that turns things into black and white and the kids in schools are taught how to toe the line. It is an authoritarian culture and a culture of propaganda. They eat it up.

“The churches are pretty annoyed, you see, that secular politics has all but stripped them of their power over the years, so they have been formulating strategies to win in politics for a long time. Who owns the most land, the most wealth? Who takes ten percent of your income? It’s a cynical ploy to buy your politics, by playing it at its own game.

“We have received a warning from the F.B.I. about the possibility that they will be setting up here too. There is a Christian South here too, although Norway

has less of a missionary reputation. The evangelists see that religion is threatened, even in the U.S., by a propaganda medium that they have not conquered. That could see the end of several very powerful and rich empires. They are looking at ways of fighting back.”

Dermot is not sure whether he is annoyed now or simply exhausted. “So again. Why me? How can I help you?”

“According to my information, you are the one who works on these technologies here. I think you can help me to plant the information I need in the public consciousness. The short of it, Dermot, is that I need to counter-hijack this psyop pathogen.”

*

Autumnal hues are splashed onto the trees; limp yellow leaves fall along with the drops of rain splattering onto his umbrella. Dark brooding hangs in the sky, as he walks into a suddenly altered unknown.

Dermot paces solemnly back towards the tram station, his mind spinning and over-full with things to think about. Does he really believe what he has heard? Does he care? Shouldn't it be someone else's job to figure this out? *I am just a programmer. . .*

A skinny girl, in her mid twenties perhaps, is standing there waiting too. She has a short black skirt and a smart jacket, and shoulder length blond hair. She glances at him shyly. Her thin features are neither old nor young. He guesses that she must be twenty something, but who knows? She smiles shyly at him and he smiles back. Dermot has never been very good with girls, but he knows one when he sees one. And she really is one. He is not shy, but he is bashful. He finds himself aroused.

He recalls the ease with which Bishop had struck up a conversation. Just look unaffected and say the words, he thinks. “So when do these trams go anyway?” he says, as matter of factly as he can.

She just smiles.

“Do you have the time?”

“Sorry.”

He stands there in the rain, watching the drops splash on the pavement. Nearby he can hear soft ambient song echoing from a jazz cafe, contrasting with the proximity of the thudding pellets. It is all vanishing now, slipping away. The whole meeting is dissolving into the reality of those hammering drops. He finds himself suffused by a melancholy and his eyes are drawn to the girl's slight figure. She seems more important to him at this moment.

A rumbling caterpillar tram thunders around the corner, squeaking on its tracks, as the lights change to green; it stops in front of them. Doors whoosh

neatly open, ejecting outwards and sideways, like a space capsule, and bid them entry into a crowded chassis. There is only one double seat left. He sits down next to the girl, looking down at her skinny legs, black tights, short skirt. Damn. What dream is he wrestling with now?

The train rumbles through the town, shoving them from side to side, as it is clumsily forced to alter direction by the bumps and imperfections in the track, and thoughts abandon him. All he can see now is her blond hair and small hands as they fumble with an old mobile handset. Something about her is special. There are beautiful girls everywhere, but she has a quality that attracts him. An undefinable fragility. A calmness. Something else?

Several stops. He is nearing his destination. He has to say something. The effort is excruciating and results in more of a squeak than an inquiry.

“That’s a classic,” he blurts.

“What?” she snaps. Nervous wide, Scandinavian eyes, full of terror. She knows that he has been looking at her. She must be sure that he is a creep.

“Your mobile. I haven’t seen one like that for years.”

“Oh.” Her voice softens. “It’s my brother’s.” Then, as an afterthought: “Are you into computers?”

“Eh . . . yes,” he half-stammers, taken aback.

She nods with the outline of a smile.

He fumbles in his pocket and pulls out a paper card with his name and position on it: a gimmick from his old company. She takes it as though it is something dirty, fingering it as though she does not really know what it is for.

“Dermot,” she reads. “That’s you.” It is not really a question, but he has to say yes. “I haven’t seen one of these for a long time.” She closes her palm with the card in it, as if to say: this is unimportant, but I am going to keep it anyway.

Normally people ask him about his name. What kind of a name is that? Dermot? But not her. She seems to accept it without question. He likes that. It makes her seem experienced and intelligent. She does not say another word.

The tram comes to a stop.

“Well, anyway. Nice to meet you.”

The girl smiles without looking his way and says nothing.

He flees the tram, stepping back out into the rain and starts off towards his apartment. That’s about as far as he ever gets with women.

8

They crowd into virtually anonymous bars, congregate in the backs of cars, of taxis or trains, like warehouse stock; a flotilla of suits celebrating their importance through the ritual snubbery of the ambient mass. Make no eye-contact, forget taste and touch. Don't waste your time on on these senseless bluffs. It's all coded now into THX and pixel-dust.

Constellations of wolves and sharks, reach out into the troposphere, the arctisphere, beaming their microwave egos across the void, drawing sustenance from insubstantial, imagined intimacy. Remote voices joined by paternoster telegram.

The spaces between them are empty and void of meaning or interpretation. What happened to the guesswork? The curiosity? They know only the highways and datastreams of the airwaves. Make room, asshole. Did I tread on someone's toe?

They wander from place to place, through interpersonal space, every translation to each location the same to the spider man, to the cat woman. Minds wander in the half world of the dimly connecting and the clumsily colliding; no apologies. Suspicious and envious of limbo shadows. Excuse me? Did you say something? Just drive me to the airport, will you? Can't you see I'm in the middle of an important meeting?

We, the friends of Satan, indulge in our egotistical rites: that's what we are here for, right? Never put others' wishes before your own. Never invite a stranger home, unless it's a commodity fuck. Forget those bothersome neighbours. They don't know anything about your problems, your needs. They cannot imagine what you are going through. Why should they care what we do? Why should we care what they think?

Would you get out of my way, idiot! Stupid bag of flesh and fat. Smell bad, dress bad, you're nothing to me. What, you don't think I got any friends of my own?

Put on your goggles, don earplugs, your spider suit. Forget about the tropical interpersonal chill. Go on parade, don't be afraid, you know the drill. Just show yourself, be yourself. You don't have to answer to anyone.

This icy playground in summer, is lit only by these ex-patriot solar rays, now embalmed in microwaves; place kids on standby, in their newly formed ranks of curds and whey. The kids of today speak no common language anyway. Cottage lumps of cheese, now separate with ease, self-dissected shards of kid, no useless

friendships undid. Herded flocks of angry boys and gossiping girls, babbling into their hands-free toys.

Don't talk to me! Do I know you?

9

Sunday morning. Den sees the flimsy houses they build in this part of California as he drives past the residential lot. They seem like cardboard shanty towns, scarcely strong enough to withstand a sea breeze let alone an earthquake. Do they get earthquakes down here? Decent middle class people live here but why in such rag tag accommodation? It is the merest veneer of order on top of the desert chaos.

As he looks at these houses, he thinks of the security of his London office block, its grand entrance exuding authority and substance. Here the power lines seem to be hung up like washing lines in the shanty commune, haphazardly hooked over poles that look like shaven cacti and pass through crumbling plaster into these shacks. He can see the obscene trappings of reality intruding forth into this would-be civilization, like a broken bone penetrating the skin. This is not like the slick malls and corporate cathedrals he is used to. Perhaps he is spoiled? What if it is really this way everywhere, just beneath the surface—even in the aging dereliction of old London town. He has never really considered it before, how the perfect marble foyer creates such stature and grace, such triumphant authority over the natural world. How deep does the illusion really go? he wonders.

As he drives out of the city, around the curving roads, he sees the families gathering at the coffee houses. At one time, Sunday was a day when people probably went to Church in most parts of the Christian world. Then there was a time when Sunday was for washing your car. Now we have reached the age of going out for Sunday coffee, he thinks. It is useful to see these trends. They are partly a testament to the work that his branch of industry has fostered.

Sirens sound far off. There is a commotion ahead on the freeway. Some police are already here. He slows down to match the rest of the traffic and begins to see several police cars at the side of the freeway already. A group of activists

seems to have taken over a huge advertising billboard and have done something to it. It does not seem to be showing video properly in real time anymore. Den slows down even more to look closely. The billboard seems to be showing a political advertisement for the upcoming elections. The film is some kind of sales campaign for the Democrat candidate, but the image on the board seems to be getting stuck in certain frames. It begins in bursts, showing the overly made-up face of what is presumably the candidate for the election – Den cannot honestly say that he has seen this man before, nor does he much care. He has learned that some of these billboards can break into the car sound system as it passes. Luckily for him, he has turned off the radio altogether, or he would doubtless be assailed by some of this nonsense. His lip curls at the irony of his own intolerance of this kind of advertising. Well, you don't have to like it to make it.

He thinks back to the pleasant afternoon he spent with Cathy Kim, and how they ended up in his bed.

Suddenly the image is gone and a slogan appears prominently but looking not unlike a frame in the actual video sequence. The frame contains a slogan: WEISSKOPF MAKES CHILD PORNOGRAPHY. Some more of the film runs and then another: WEISSKOPF IS UN-AMERICAN. Then another: WEISSKOPF THINKS HE'S INTELLECTUAL. And so it seems to repeat.

Den is a little curious but it takes a moment for him to see what is going on. It looks like some kind of smear campaign. But are these activists responsible or are they just exposing the subliminal content that someone else has planted in the ads?

Some international news channels are here on the scene already. That seems strange in itself, since the police seem to be doing their best to shut this down quickly. Perhaps this was staged.

The traffic is slowing down and moving into single file. His mind wanders to the work he did on political advertising in the U.K. a couple of years earlier. It seems a far cry from this. A police man waves him past, staring at the line of traffic with impenetrable black glasses. Den does not look back, but files past and follows the traffic into a line that is bound for the next exit. He follows the ramp as it curves up and around and directs him away from the traffic. After a short spell on this residential looking road, he finds the turn he needs.

Finally he is off the freeway and onto the narrow road that leads towards to hills. It is narrow but straight and it fills him with a sense of release, as if this narrow constraint on his driving were somehow a new found freedom. He puts his foot down on the gas, the only freedom left to him, and enjoys the simple sense of power that the acceleration gives.

As he approaches the forested hills, the road begins to wind around a river and then begins to enter a series of bends to ascend. He has to slow at the first of

the sharper bends and notices that the road quality is deteriorating. Den curses the sluggishness of the car and shifts the gear stick into terrain mode. He loathes the automation of this rental. Soon they will automate the steering of these cars too and then there will be little room for drivers. Probably a road like this would cause cars of the future to simply stop and deny the possibility of coping.

He drives up the swinging road to the chateau in the open top convertible. He enjoys navigating these switchback hairpin bends. They illuminate his spirit with an invigorating sense that he still matters to the driving process. This is the life, he thinks. The complete mastery of a simple challenge.

He follows the winding road up the hill, passing a couple of residences hiding in the trees along the way and feels it gradually flatten out. As he reaches the crest there is an open gate marked with the game logo. He steers into it and puts his foot down once more for the last mile.

He reaches the main gate house and from there the small parking lot and cuts through the cars to park almost in front of the house. Judging from the number of vehicles, including several limo's, other guests have been arriving for some time.

Den puts the roof up on the Cabriolet and uses the cover to check his appearance in the car mirror. A Sunday brunch reception is a very American and very charming touch, Den thinks as he brushes his dark suit. These meaningless functions are done so well here. There are few vestiges in Europe that take themselves seriously enough for such formal occasions. Too bad.

Den gathers himself and steps out of the car. There is a faint smell of smoke in the air, perhaps a barbecue. He trots up the steps and is greeted by a doorman who checks his ID and dispatches him into the lounge area.

The room is impressive. With only a little daylight filtering into the welcome lounge, the lighting is subdued, allowing candle light to work its charms and welcoming an air of expectation. The date must be approaching Halloween, Den thinks, as the room has been filled with carved pumpkin heads with candles flickering inside them. But it is only mid-October. Well why not? Christmas, after all, starts in November these days.

Tables of canopés are laid out on silver trays with cakes and drinks multiplying at the hands of smartly dressed Latin waiters. A mighty fish, frozen in the moment of capture, spews nuts and vegetables from its gape. People are already helping themselves to the food. There is perhaps a hundred persons in this social pin ball game.

Den wanders in, wondering how long it will take to find someone plausible to speak to. These dinner parties are always exceedingly dull. No one really knows what to say to anyone else. Still, these dos are good places for networking and that is what he has come here to do; on the other hand, some of the company at these things can be intolerably dull. Most of the chit-chat has nothing at all to do

with the group that is here. He picks up a glass of champagne-like bubbles and sips at it, surveying the scene.

He strolls, as casually as he can, into the lounge, observing the silhouettes of small groups that have already arrived against the huge garden windows. He sees a tall, broad man, who seems to stand out from the rest for his sheer dimensions. "Social structure emerged when we left the egalitarian hunter-gatherer life for organized agriculture," he is saying. "It is a development that is hard to reverse. It has pushed us out onto an evolutionary ledge. If we don't learn how to fly, we have to perish."

A woman who is staring at him with an almost annoyed intensity, interjects, "So, you think that society is a time-bomb? That we are not really adapted to make it work? I mean, not fully?"

"That could be true," he admits. "Certainly, we are far from perfect. For one thing, our intelligence gives us basically anti-social behaviour. Look at the insects: *they* are adapted to life in society. We have too many selfish qualities."

"Yes," says another man, "but our human intelligence is what made us gravitate more socially together in the first place. Our need for grooming? Or do you disagree with that theory?"

"Well," says the woman, "that has a basis in truth, but our intelligence arose because of the complexity of the relationship between those in the group. Competition, particularly in sexual selection is not the same as cooperation. The arms race of intelligence is a result of psychological warfare, not of peace."

A short woman, who is more smartly dressed than the others adds, "So do you think evolution will ever change us to make us more conducive to society?"

"Well," laughs the second man, "natural selection has been all but eliminated in the West. If a new phase of mankind is to emerge, it would have to be in the third world. But that does not seem very likely. The changes would have to be small. We are too effective at changing the environment. The environment no longer changes us." They all laugh.

"My God, can we allow it?" says a voice to his left. Den is startled and focuses on a man in military uniform. He does not recognize the man but he smiles congenially at him and raises his glass of champagne and his eyebrows together.

"You gave a great talk yesterday—Morris, don't you think?"

"That's right . . ." Den extends his hand, changing glass-hand humbly.

"Cedric Hopkins—General Hopkins, by habit." He smiles. "I think you convinced us all that what we are doing is a force for good. Certainly I think of my grandchildren moving into a better world, where we can all feel safe from the noise of information trash and where crime is a thing of the past."

"It would be nice to think that could happen. Perhaps I over-sold it a little," he laughs.

"Oh, don't sell yourself short, son. You did such a good job on everything else."

"Well, I did my best."

"You just arrive? Got yourself something to eat?"

"Oh, yes. I just got here. I can wait a minute for food. I was just trying to get my bearings."

"You've been to these things before?"

"Once before," Den admits. "A year or so ago, we had a similar get-together, but without all the press attention—and far fewer people."

"I see. So you've been spoiled by our taxpayers before then." He winks.

Another man sees the general and comes over to them. "General," he acknowledges and shakes the General's hand. "And . . . ah, I think I recognize you. You gave the talk at the conference?"

"Den Morris. Guilty." They shake hands perfunctorily.

"Colin Frank. I'm just a friend of the General here, and an investor." He smiles. "You know—more money than sense." he laughs again.

It is fascinating, Den thinks, how the old social rules of thumb work time and time again. If you place an important figure in a crowd, he or she will accrete hangers-on in a heartbeat. It is like a magical law of attraction. Fortunately, he thinks, Americans have a natural congeniality about them in a neutral setting. It is easy to get along with people. "So, General, what is your role in all this?" Den asks.

"You mean: what am I doing at this pussy-assed brunch, full of egg-heads and schemers?" He laughs heartily. "Well, I am happy to say that my primary motivation is to eat some of the excellent food that I know will be served here today, as you should too. It too often that we forget to appreciate these fine things, when they are laid out for us in the lap of luxury."

"Sounds good to me!" Den says.

"Alas, some of the people here are too used to this life. You should put them all in active duty sometime. When you spend time in the field, you learn to survive on less than ideal culinary achievements, shall we say."

They laugh with him.

"Barring that, I hope to just get to know some of the fine folks who have been involved in this project. I am just a military man, but I like to think that I can appreciate good work when I see it."

"You are part of the project?"

"Well, I have been following it for some time. I am pretty much a desk job these days, though don't say it too loudly. I try to keep up with what is going on in the army's research programs."

"So, General, do you think the game will have any benefits, in a strategic perspective? Do you think my investment will make be money?"

"I am sure it will." He looks around him, as if scanning for someone. More people are entering now. Another car must have arrived. "I actually have a friend, who said he would make it here. He works for the space industry, you see." He sticks his tongue under the skin over his lip, as if trying to move something stuck in his teeth and swallows. "Hmm. He tells me that you would be amazed at the bi-products that emerge from any major project that is technologically challenging. You see, to make these things happen, you have to involve so many creative minds and give them an opportunity and a salary to do what they do best. Under conditions like that, great minds do great things."

"Most people would say that the space industry is a no brainer," Frank mutters. "There's not so many people standing in line to invest in that anymore."

"Well, there is the voice of a cynic," he laughs and stares at Den "You should be wary of men with too much money. But then you are trained to deal with them, I would think. You have the right weapons."

Den laughs. "I've heard that the space race did produce useful innovation. Maybe even computers are a result of it: the very technology we are using here."

"No," says the General. "Computers come from my turf. That would be bombs. Bombs and planes."

"Well, now we're talking more lucrative. Now you are getting me interested," Frank says. "Arms sales. Now there is a profitable business."

"Perhaps not for much longer, Colin. Isn't that part of the vision here?" He raises eyebrows searchingly toward Den,

"As I understand it, yes."

"Oh, come on," Frank mocks. "You are not seriously telling me you believe our own propaganda—that, by putting people into a safe environment where they all can meet and play together, that you will promote peace and understanding."

"Well, aside from putting a decent meal in their stomachs, that is a crude rendition of a complex argument, but essentially correct. But not only that. By putting the opportunity into the hands of American business and our allies, we are providing a financial incentive to turn entertainment dollars into a force for good. It will draw people in, and they will love it. Before you know it, the benefits are spreading out in all directions!"

"I think the lodge is somewhat afraid of the idea, General."

"Bahh, Colin, you should spend more time away from financial sharks and get out into the world."

By now, the general has attracted more attention and, by standing in his wake, Den has also been noticed. Several-passers by have nodded to him as he stood here. He feels quite important now, and his posture has begun to elevate in keeping with his new stature.

"Mr. Morris?" says a voice. It is Alfred Cooney, the man who has organized much of the conference. "I would like you to meet someone special. Would you

excuse us, General?"

"But of course, take him away to some more interesting people!" He laughs again, in a fatherly way. "Have fun, son."

"Thank you, general. Perhaps we'll talk again later."

Cooney leads Den away from the growing cloud towards a young man, perhaps of his own age and another perhaps in his forties. The first has classically Jewish features, short and plump, with balding ginger hair and freckles. He is badly dressed in a light flannel suit that looks as though it is ruined by sweat stains. "This is Jim Moskewitz, from the department of marketing studies here in San Diego."

"Mr. Morris."

"Call me Den."

"And this is Jonathan Bradshaw from the University of Southern California. He has been one of the instigators of the new anti-terrorism study bachelor study program." He is a skinny man, of about the same height, with thick black hair, somewhat better dressed. Den has no idea what his ethnic background might be.

"Hello. A study programme in anti-terror?"

"No less."

"That sounds interesting."

Bradshaw begins to describe the basic ideas of his course, as though it were a pampered child prodigy being flaunted before socially inferior parents. His tone bursts with pride and arrogance, stemming from a total lack of self-doubt. Even Den, master of himself, finds the man presumptuous and even boorish. Some of the ideas are interesting, but his words simply seem to say: you probably don't understand this but I'll feed you some scraps to be politely condescending.

"But you are part of this meeting. What aspect of the game are you interested in?" Den interjects, when he has reached his tolerance level.

"Oh, what aspects am I not interested in?" He waives loftily.

"Jonathan is a pretty dynamic kinda guy," adds Moskewitz in apparently genuine admiration. "He is an expert on pretty much anything you would like to mention."

Bradshaw does not protest.

"I can see that."

Cooney says, "Den, I hear that you are one of the creative interpreters of the game. Perhaps you would tell me about just how you go about turning out mission objectives into what the end user sees?"

"I am in charge of molding the team that does the real work," Den replies calmly. "I play a part in the process, but there are many others involved. It is really something like the job of an architect, I think."

"I have heard that your work is quite impressive."

“Well, my team has been working with gaming for some time, doing profiling and characterization, scenery, subliminal messaging and so on.”

“Directed imaging. That is what they call their mind-control tricks,” says Bradshaw. “It’s all part of the marketing parlance. The different packages take a different attitude and undermine the opposing viewpoints.”

At that moment, a gong sounds and a voice calls for seating to begin in the main dining hall.

“Ah, time to be seated, gentlemen. Why don’t we move into the dining area?”

Den takes the opportunity to wander away from the group he has been set up with. He is wondering whether Cathy Kim is here, or if there is any other talent in the room. So far he can only see well-to-do airbags, huffing and puffing at the wolves in sheep clothing. Someone at a nearby table is complaining a little too loudly. Den wonders how many welcome drinks he has already consumed.

His entrance to the room is a moment of revelation for him. Several groups are already seated and his appearance in the doorway is greeted with several glances and smiles, as if people now recognize him. His performance at the public meeting must have been a greater success than he has hoped for.

He begins to run through his routines for impressing people at dinner parties, a few anecdotes for a suitable occasion, a menu of discussion topics to steer the conversation without making him appear single-minded or boring.

A group sits down at the table beside him and one of the group greets him.

“We enjoyed your talk,” he says. “Are you going to be doing more of the imaging?” he asks. “I might be interested in an internship at your company, if you are hiring.” He has a slightly camp, Latin accent and his features are possibly Mexican, Den thinks.

“Well, we have no current plans. Who’ do you work for?”

“DiPix,” he utters, flatly, with mock gravitas. “But don’t hold that against me.”

“Or tell him he has a beautiful body!” his friend laughs.

Den is looking for Kim; finally, he makes a sighting but he sees that she is led to another table. Kim is speaking closely with an anonymous looking man with glasses. She is wearing a black suit of smart synthetic looking material that is loose enough to engage the imagination but tight enough to reward him with a few hints of her astounding figure. She looks great, he thinks. He cannot identify exactly what it is about her, but there is no doubt that she is both attractive and alluring and he wants to see her some more before his visit is over.

“Look, Den, why don’t you join us here. Tell us some more about what you are doing.”

Den sees that there is no space next to Kim, and the other tables around seem to be filled in advance,. There is no particular alternative so he bites the bullet and says, charmingly, “Thank you. That’s kind.”

The brunch is served seated and Den finds himself trapped amongst these programmers who liked his presentation. They are well meaning and friendly, but they offer him no opportunities for advancement. At best he might learn a little about his competitors here; but, after his talk, that seems to be redundant. He is the man of the hour and only needs to follow up on it. But there is still time yet.

Some of the programmers have come down from their Los Angeles film studios to join the meeting. One could not come owing to an outbreak of forest fire close to his house. They seem to have mixed feelings about the project and begin to discuss grievances that are not entirely appropriate for a brunch held in the lion's mouth itself.

At least this is not a team of fully committed automata, he discovers. He will be exposed to a little bout of honesty, a rare privilege in his line of business.

"Our goals are being changed at the last minute," says one called Carlos. "We do all this work on the characters and then we get a last minute spec change on the concealments, sometimes even rendering details."

A woman wearing a reporter badge, who works for the project, has joined them at the table. She is young and pretty. Den smiles at her. "And you are?"

"Kay Bayley," she says. "How do you do? I work for the press department."

"How do you do" Den replies.

"It is hot where I came from", she says, out of place, as she seats herself. "You must be European?" Looking at Den.

He nods and shakes hands. "How hot is hot?"

"Oh—'bout ninety Fahrenheit. I don't know what that is in that Celtic time y'all use over there."

"Celsius," Den nods.

"I don't understand the jargon," she says in a southern accent. "Do you mind if I ask what y'all are talking about?"

The Mexicans look sceptical but play along. One of them explains, "There are several levels of actuality in the game," he begins. "There are the high level goals (called mission objectives), the interpretation of those goals (called concealment). Then there is rendering of strategy and imagery, where Den is involved. Finally there are the technical algorithms and resource economists."

"I see."

"Well, anyway, as I was saying. There is some strange shit going on. We have been getting these 'interventions' from the contractor. Some of them have been on government paper and shit. It's almost like these changes are coming directly from some government agency."

"What kinds of changes?" Den asks, vaguely interested in this gossip.

"You know, stuff like moral parameters and facial changes to distinguish more clearly between good characters and bad characters."

"Yeah," says another. "It's like all the good characters have to look like fucking Disney drawings with the big sappy eyes, and all the bad guys have unshaven convict faces."

"And that's just the women!" the other chortles.

They laugh.

"Yeah, but no shit, man. This is weird. I mean, who are they kidding? I thought the idea of the game was to have these complex characterizations, not this fucking cliché shit."

"Well I just think it is marvellous that this game is under the guiding hand of such a great man as our president, chosen by God" she says with the kind of conviction that a TV ad or tortured prisoner might redeem.

"Say what?" says one of the programmers rudely.

"The game is about the future of our youth. It seems only right that it should require the highest standards of morality," she recites.

Den's heart sinks as the others look at each other in hopelessness. She is an attractive girl, with a pretty face and too much hair, but what she said makes her suddenly as ugly as anyone he has ever seen. The attractiveness of her shell seems only to compound the deceit.

As the discussion continues, frustrations begin to emerge amongst the guests. Den follows the loosened tongues with interest. This could be significant to his role in what happens next. America is suffering from civil unrest in several states due to the increasingly right wing detachment of the government, but the last place he expects to hear this kind of open criticism is here.

The food servings seem to pass quickly. Den does not overindulge. He wants to be in top form, but he eats a little to pass the time. This group is not exactly what he had envisaged for today, but it is slightly interesting to him that some international members of the team clearly feel left out of the enterprise. It is all very well that the American directors want to be in control of the operation, but some freedom must be relinquished if there is to be progress. There is a dark mist of foreboding thickening in these conversations.

Why indeed should they be satisfied with the banner of a single media corporation's logo when each brushstroke of the creative enterprise is an entity in itself? The game is not just about technology, but about design, architecture, art and drama. It is perhaps the greatest artistic undertaking in history. Why should it be corrupted entirely for some multinational marionette for the US government? Why should the efforts of so many be subsumed by the profits of so few?

As they are served coffee, they are beginning to repeat themselves. "As things stand today, the company is guilty of creative interference and moral embezzlement," one of them claims. "There should be a proper acknowledgement of the sources of ideas, especially since the game would be an obvious vehicle of propaganda without our concealments."

“You mean as opposed to a subtle form of propaganda now?”

“Exactly. Sometimes I wonder if we are doing the right thing by working on this at all.”

“My lord,” says the reporter girl, “Have you lost your way?”

“Jesus, girl!”

“People are just not being treated properly, if you ask me. It’s not just us, it’s all over the country. People are demonstrating in the streets for fuck sake, and still the government is treating everyone like children.”

“Well, we have to trust the government to know what is right for the nation,” she drones in her southern accent.

One of the programmers called Juan Pablo becomes irritated. “Lady, if you want government bullshit blown in your cunt, that’s fine, but shit is going on here that is not all it seems. Why don’t you write that in your fucking propaganda broadcasts.”

She blinks with an open jaw; the blow stings and she is apparently seeing stars in the crockery. Several others from other tables have turned to stare.

At that moment a couple that has risen walks past Den saying, “The protest groups believe that a skilled psyop team can inject actual attitudes and motivations into a willing mind.” They look at Den as they pass and the man gestures towards him, as if implicating him in this little conspiracy.

“How interesting,” says the man’s apparent wife. “In what way?”

Den uses the opportunity to extricate himself from the table. “Would you excuse me?” He rises and nods to the passers-by as if pretending to join them.

“This young man probably agrees with me, yes?” Den tries to look politely surprised, as the man continues, unimpeded. “It is the ultimate form of saturation teaching,” he says. “Eventually people’s applied knowledge of the world will be erased by the noise of mighty slogans. That is what communist and fascist regimes have tried to do throughout history. Look at North Korea today and they are doing a pretty god job. No longer do you just feed people Omega 3 to make them think better—now you can more or less directly inject any idea straight into their brains by targeting their favourite brain centre.”

“It must be very exciting work.”

“But do we fully believe it?”

“Look at the bible belt, for crying out loud! It has been going on successfully for years!”

They make their way to the exit. Several tables are starting to leave the dining area now, for the lounge beyond.

“But tell me,” the woman asks quite seriously, now looking at Den directly, “you were talking about this in your speech. When do you think the human mind becomes saturated? When do you think the noise of so many impulses becomes so great that a person might actually go mad?”

Den smiles uncomfortably and is saved from answering by another man who has been hovering behind the couple, listen in on their conversation.

“Don’t mind us wolves,” he says. “We are all harmless here, except for the folks with the money. Can I get you a drink, Mr. Morris?” He offers his hand in a manner that seems to brush the couple aside; they glance at each other and continue on alone.

Den adjusts his composure and asks: “And you are?”

The man steps forward, “Howard.” He offers his hand. “I heard your speech. It was good.” He stuffs his hands in his untidy sports jacket as if searching for something. “Oh I’m from the psychology advisory. I’m not supposed to say more.” He winks. His face is wrinkled with pocket of loose skin as though he has lost weight.

The man picks at the back of his teeth as he speaks, as if to remove some piece of food from them. “Uhhh. Consultant. Strategy.” He nods, as if agreeing with himself.

Den tries to steer them towards the figure of Cathy Kim. She is standing with the same man, still talking at length in a subdued way. She sees him now and seems to jerk to attention, acknowledging him with her chin. The lounge is filling with bodies now. Some glasses of dessert wine are circulating with waiters. Den takes one.

“I am not sure I completely agree with your analysis, you know,” Howard says.

Den looks at him calmly. “Well thank goodness for that,” he laughs, concealing his uncertainty. “Everyone else seems so convinced; I was beginning to wonder if this were all a dream.”

Howard laughs. “Ah, avoid conflict at any cost. It is easier to stab you in the back once it is turned than to face you head on. But I don’t have the social graces you know.”

Den examines the man’s grey looking pallor, wishing that he could escape what seems to be an obvious trap. “So what is your angle—Howard?”

“Well”, he says. “Your summary of the work was fine, but it is this business of using the game to engage people. What was it you said? Something about getting kids engaged in political and social issues by adding real-world context to the games. You make it almost sound educational.”

“I think it is,” Den parries.

“Good. Then there is a chance that it might be. But I don’t think you put the case strongly enough. Have you ever thought of the possibilities for forming players’ basic attitudes to learning through the game?”

“I am not sure I know what you mean.”

“I mean. . .” An elegant woman in a red dress taps him on the shoulder and hands him something without interrupting. He acknowledges her and puts the

small object in his pocket. "I mean the subliminal signals and implicit cues that are placed into the imagery." She walks away, glancing only tangentially at Den.

"Well, what makes you think there are subliminal signals?"

Howard laughs loudly. "Nice try, Den. Can I call you Den?!"

Den nods in amusement.

"Well—did you see the cuffuffle on the highway, coming here?"

"The billboard."

"Yes, the billboard. An angry mob of people tired of being sent these subliminal signals took over the electronics in order to reveal to all, in slow motion, just what the billboard is really doing."

Den snatches a glance behind him and sees that Cathy Kim has received a call and is walking away from the lounge to talk. "Well, okay. We have subliminal channels in our scenery. That is part of the spec. You must know that."

He nods. "Of course, but how is it being used?"

"Well, I don't know all of the content. My company works on certain things, and helps to design the strategies for targeting interest groups."

"But you have access to these channels. Channels that millions of people all over the globe are using."

"That is true," he agrees.

"A position of great responsibility."

"Yes, I suppose it is."

"So, in fact, you have the skills to manipulate the manipulators, if you wanted to. You could even change the course of the development. You are a powerful man, and you perhaps don't even realize it."

A plump woman approaches purposefully, with a lesser man in tow and, thankfully ignores Den entirely. Rather he addresses himself to Howard. "Mister Rubin," she interrupts, "would you do me the honour of allowing me to present you to the Vice Chancellor of the faculty of political studies."

"I . . . Look, would you excuse me. I don't mean to be rude, but I have to speak to someone quite urgently."

It seems that the time for substantial conversation is over. People are becoming weary and drunk. "Mr. Morris, you haven't touched your drink. That will never do. Can I get you something else?"

"No, no thank you. Excuse me a moment, I have to find a t . . . restroom."

Howard looks to Den and seems to be about to say something, but the dinner gong sounds once again. Saved by the tolling of the bell, Den thinks.

"Ladies and gentlemen, colleagues and guests, may I have your attention please."

The talking gradually desists and faces turn to find the source of the voice. Den makes his escape while he can, walking purposefully towards to hallway. He pushes forward through the band of dignitaries and lesser mortals gathered

in various states of attire before him. Who on Earth have they not asked to this monsters' ball? he thinks.

"Those of you here today, are helping to build a better future for the world. . ."

Den suppresses a pang of dismissal at the political rhetoric. Certainly there are people here who believe in the game as the important channel of communication in the future.

He decides to make his get-away while the speech is going on.

He almost walks into a man whom he learned to loathe at last year's meeting. Den has been avoiding the wife of this man, whom he met last year. Celia Waites. She is older than him, perhaps in her forties; she has been stalking him impatiently since seeing him at the conference. He has been trying to avoid a meeting, given his current involvement with Kim, but she catches up with him at the edge of the room.

She is stunning in a tightly fitting dress that highlights her perfectly preserved figure. He is reminded of the reason they frequently ended up in his hotel room last year. She might be older than him but her astonishing figure and elegant attire makes her smoulder in a calm and demure way that he finds alluring.

"Hi," he says simply.

"Hello," she looks up at him as if peeking under the rim of her eyebrows. "It's very nice to see you here."

He nods. "You look wonderful, as usual."

"And so do you."

"How are you?"

She tilts her head. "I am fine."

"So, how long will you be here in California?"

"I have to leave in a day or so from L.A.."

"That's a shame."

"Yes, it is," he agrees. "I like coming here."

"You look good," she states, plainly, wistfully, scanning him quickly with her eyes.

"So how is your work here? Are you still running the economic detail?"

She nods. "It is chugging along as it should. It gets me out to see some faces, but it does not excite me to the depths of my being."

"I am sure you are appreciated."

"Perhaps."

"Well, these events are fun, once in a while, though," he fumbles, lost for words.

She smiles and brushes the remark aside. "So there might be time for a quick visit from a handsome prince?"

He smiles at her genuinely. She is quite incredible, he thinks. "I would like that," he says. "But I don't think there will be an opportunity. My time is pretty much booked up. Perhaps I can take you up on that another time."

"Well, I don't know when I shall be available."

He nods.

"Well, I can cross my fingers."

She looks back at him more sadly than in annoyance. Suddenly he feels a pang of empathy for her. She is clearly a lonely woman, stuck in a lifestyle that neither appreciates her style nor her wit. She smiles ruefully back, impaling him on her sharp gaze, intense and wide-eyed. "You appalling man, Dennis," she says. "You know you are the best fuck in this sorry group. I'm not asking you to love me you know." Then she smiles to make light of it. "Maybe next time, then."

They exchange stares, then she moves off, pushing her upper body against his, making sure to brush against him in all the right places. He finds himself uncomfortably aroused and sorely tempted.

Jesus, Den. Get a grip, he thinks. Take control of your life.

He composes himself, quenching a pang of guilt, looks back at her as she walks away from him and then presses on to the hallway, suppressing any further thought.

He emerges into the spacious hallway and sees Cathy Kim standing by the sculpture in the crossroads of the entrance hall. She flashes a smile at him as he approaches. "Hello, cowboy," she flirts. "How was your brunch?"

He blows air through trumpet lips and gives her a significant look.

"Well, it's a good thing that we'll be staying here for a while. I am feeling a little giddy."

"You seemed to be heavily into a discussion about something," he says.

"Yes, someone I have worked for earlier."

"So how did you get here?"

"I caught a ride with a colleague. But I need a lift back."

"Good."

"So have you made any money? Any contacts?"

Den laughs. "No, these brunches are not for doing business. With luck, I might still make some good contacts, or pick up something useful. How about you?"

"I am here for fun. It's you I needed to meet." She smiles; Den feels a tingle of response.

"Happy to oblige. Of course, you realize that if I am going to be helping you with your work, ours fortunes are intertwined."

She grins back at him. "Then I should do my best to support you."

"Let me rescue you from this rabble," she says.

Music has started at the edge of the room again.

“Would you like to dance, Den?”

“So you think they can still pull this off, even with the story broken?”

She puts a hand on his rear and clasps it. “Like Eisenhower said: take nothing for granted.”

10

Reboot. The morning greets Sara with damp earth and clear skies. The night’s blessing has left snow on the higher ground and the rank smell of rotting vegetation around the cabin.

Diagnostics. Felt better. Perhaps she should stay here for one more night. Could use a day to recover from the climb up here and tend the blisters that her pampered lifestyle has rendered her susceptible to. She is no stranger to the rugged lifestyle, but it has been a while. Besides, she will not be able to defy the mountain police for long.

Self-test. She winces as neglected musculature bemoans its strife. Legs swing stiffly off the bunk and meet with the icy cold wooden floor. A short trip today. I am not going very far. Need to recharge soon.

Interface. Picking up her wrist console from her pile of clothes on the floor, she performs a quick scan. She is picking up a stray signal. It looks like a VeiVek. That, at least, is good news. She makes a quick attempt to log on to the VeiVek’s console, but there is no answer.

A message has parked on her mobile. It is from the mountain rescue service. It tells her that the mountain is still off limits, and tells her to call in immediately. She considers the request. She ought to call in. She doesn’t want to talk to them; on the other hand, she doesn’t want them coming after her and landing her with a fine. Perhaps she should just accept fate, roll over and wait for someone to cuff and incarcerate her. If there are gang fights out there, it could be dangerous, couldn’t it?

All right, she’ll call in. But not yet. She has an appointment to keep first. Still no word from the French. Still no word from her supervisor at the research council. Fine then, just abandon me in my time of need.

Stow Sara's private insecurities, and don Vibe-armour for the new day.

*

Everything was going well for Vibe until recently: work has been steady, progress acceptable. Then came a letter to her group, informing them that her project would most likely be cancelled due to changes in funding priorities. Just a few months of life left, maybe? All her work this past year potentially to be wasted, rendered useless in a single splurge of electronic administrative ink. All for nothing. That is not something to lie down and accept. Not her. This is about her future, her present. And let's not forget the past, while we're at it.

She has been trying to contact Lindgren, her co-advisor who also works for the Norwegian Research Council, for confirmation of the letter — and general pleading for clemency, but he has been unavailable. Unavailable! In other words, embarrassed to speak to her. Bullshit.

And as if to add insult to the threat of injury, that was when she began to lose her telemetry. One by one, and then in droves, she lost communication with her babies. All of the chirping that she needed to complete the current phase of her work simply stopped arriving. She investigated and met with nonsense. She wailed for help, but no one bothered to reply to a stupid graduate student. She contacted the group of French technicians who deployed them and received no more than a non-committal text.

With no one helping, it seemed like a good time to flee the city and come up here to see what was going on. So she asked for leave to go into the field. Expecting hesitation, she was met only with administrative obstinacy—a perfect reason to flout their wishes and come here to see with her own eyes.

How freakin' hard could they make it for her?

Someone is just not on her side. she thinks. But here in the mountains, few things matter in the quite the same way. City matters seem to pale beside the power of nature, and mere human matters are rendered trivial by the basic matter of survival. This is a good place to be at a time like this.

You freak, Vibe, she thinks. *You're just too used to getting your own way.*

*

Recharging. After breakfast, she feels detached from the city. Even a brief bout of messaging with Bea does not refocus her self-image. She needs snacks for the day: chocolate to stave off the provinciality of her surroundings.

Access goodies, digg, snop, cleansing sugar. A young man is in line in front of her at the front desk. He looks like he has been holed up here for a few days. He looks bored and a little too comfortable. He too craves something sweet.

"We have chocolates, muffins, sugar candy. . ."

"Yeah, I'll take a muffins," he says.

Vibe cringes. He could be quite good looking, but the momentary illusion is shattered by this linguistic stupidity. "It's a muffin," she hears herself protest, involuntarily and instantly regrets it.

The man turns around. "Yeah, a muffins."

"No," she insists, "just muffin. There is no 's' on the end."

Shut up! It doesn't matter, girl.

"I'm pretty sure he said muffins."

"One muffin, several muffins. It's English."

You just can't leave it alone, can you?

"Yeah? So who made you the expert?"

He takes his muffin and leaves with a wince.

Jerk. She shudders in annoyance and embarrassment at her own bitchiness. Adding extraneous s's to English words is a Norwegian disability that her upbringing has taught her to despise. Muffins, caps, binders? Had Peter Green been here, he would have just loved her now for defending their language, wouldn't he? It is important to know these things, if you want to impress someone. Now she has gotten off on the wrong foot with this guy, probably one of the few people here at the cabin at this time of year.

Queue service event. The desk-guy is looking at her blankly with characteristic Norwegian alacrity. Now it is she who is standing there stupidly, thinking about the wrong things,

"Chocolate please," she says. "And don't spare the horses."

The man looks at her oddly as she waves her wrist interface over the sensor to pay. As she does so, a text message comes in on her mobile,

"Relaying, ad hoc. Will be at Leirvassbu tomorrow evening. Problems. Confirm receipt. Laurent."

The French. So they are not falling over themselves to meet her. Confirm receipt, my ass. What does she expect? They probably only take her half-seriously, just a kid. Just a grad student.

Then she sees the time the message was sent. Yesterday, last night. The message has been travelling ad hoc, they said. That means they have not been able to contact her directly by main net. Where are they? Somewhere off the net.

Well. At least that gives her time to rest here today. She is closer to finding out what is going on, even if they are not telling. Cool, if she could figure it out without them. . .

She arranges to keep her room for another night, takes the chocolate and flees to her room. She is not supposed to go anywhere, but still. Her mobile is already visible to the locator devices of the police, and the cabin personnel know that everyone is supposed to stay put while they round up the war-gamers, but she does not like leaving things to chance.

In her room, she unpacks what she needs from her large backpack and stuffs it into a smaller day-sack. Clothing herself for rainy weather, but light travel, she abandons the luxuries and concentrates on equipment for the VeiVeks. She ought to be able to find a few near here, given their last reported positions. A little food. Chocolate. She downloads maps into her mobile, in case she loses the signal out there. She is almost ready for Moon-walk.

*

The VeiVek project is a collaborative project between NASA and ESA and the RKA. It is a test of space engineering and robot rover technologies for rugged terrain exploration and mission maintenance. On Mars mission, or Titan trek, little robots like this have to get around in rugged terrain and perform actual work: everything from collecting samples to repairing equipment.

Some, of course, would like to use these robots for defusing mine fields or other terrestrial bombs, but that is not an application that she feels inclined to think too much about.

They come in all different sizes and classes of capabilities. Instead of one all-singing, all-roving robot, the space technologists have gone for a strategy of making several smaller, lighter, specialist robots that work as a team. A creative, collaborative ecology of workers.

Some are made in the U.S., some in Georgia, some in the Netherlands. And then there is Sara Stensrud. She has been teaching them to collaborate.

She needs to carry around some connecting probes for emergency inspection. The little robots are all supposed to interface together, without wires, but they do not all have the same hardware or software. That means she has to wander around in the wilderness looking for them. If the central controller had been operational, she could have called them all in to her location for analysis, but she cannot even interface with the controller station.

This work is a brilliant idea. What better locations than the mountain tourist trails to see if the bots can monitor the environment, perform maintenance and detect life? But times have changed since the idea was envisaged. The mountain regions are full of challenges, both environmental and human. Now they have become a playground for gang war-games.

Beam me out of here, without meeting anyone and with the minimum of fuss and bother. Options? Transcendental meditation probably only works in the Himalaya. There is the door. . .

She crawls out of the small window in her room and clambers through tall wet grass and marshy mosses to the trail, hoping that she can get far enough away before someone notices that she is gone. She feels the inclement cold of the morning bite into her, but soon she will be boiling hot and sweaty from climbing. Off we go. Back in no time, so no biggy..

In daylight optimism, challenges are fresh and bodily suffering soon forgotten. The trees are no longer sentinels but ushers, welcoming her to a path that winds and shrinks to a speck, far too quickly, up the forested valley. The horns of the valley rise up vertically, guarding the pass, way off in the distance.

On the other side of that channel, she should find what she is looking for. Perhaps an hour or two away.

Like an instrument on automatic control, she starts walking.

*

She spots her first VeiVek some time later. It seems to have become stuck on a boulder patch that is wet and mossy. She waits to see if it can sort itself out.

It will not be long before the weather becomes too poor to have these rovers out walking around. They will have to plant themselves for the winter or go to a collection spot. The carbon nano-fibres make excellent legs for walking, but they will not cope with the snow and they do not grip well on mosses and slimes.

The little locust-like device is only about fifteen centimetres long and gets around by walking and hopping on its six insect legs. Its ultra-light carbon nano-fibres and plastics are dark and almost translucent; it almost blends in to the scenery invisibly. Supposedly there is an ultra thin hot air balloon inside here somewhere that could lift it out of trouble if need be. If it is true then this one seems to have forgotten it. It has a small probe and collector for measuring soil conductivity and samples of vegetation. The little bio-memetic robot hops across a boulder like a grasshopper, skidding to a tentative halt on the slippery rock plane.

Vibe interfaces with the robot's software and verifies that it is functioning normally. No problems here, but it has no signal from a controller.

Neither do I, she thinks.

She downloads some of its data and sees that it has been faithfully collecting rain and soil samples on and off the trail for about a week, without talking to a controller. Its memory is nearing full.

She crouches down to take some pictures to verify the condition of the path and match it to the Veiv's assessment. Some of the small leaves here, which have not been rained away, are coated in a dusty deposit that could be from the metal ore processing plant down at the head of the fjord. She can analyze that separately. Now she will need samples from the top and bottom of the plant to see any anomalous DNA effects due to radiation damage in the flora and fauna. A single sample will not show much, but a principal component analysis should be able to show up some kind of trend if there is one. There will be sufficient data to correlate any patterns with the maps of the magnetic disturbances. Someone else's job, but she is happy to be a messenger.

Solar radiation is quite high as the magnetic pole steadily weakens up here. It is an ironic turn of events that the genetically manipulated plants introduced here to provide a fuel source for the larger VeiVeks, could be reprogrammed almost as soon as they are introduced in to nature by the increased radiation. What exactly will the mutation rate be when the magnetic pole starts its fibrillations?

*

In the distance, an echo, almost imperceptible. A human voice? A bird? She moves on. Nothing to see here, folks. Move along.

She climbs higher. At the top of the pass, the valley opens into a plateau: Martian moonscape, re-touched in green. Scratchy crystalline deposits of something coppery glisten on the surface of the boulders here. The scree could be nature's quarry for mineral riches, but the large boulders and deep cracks are simply a hazard for the robots. Only the largest maintenance-bots could cross this, with their paint-guns and cleaning solvents, painting their tourist T's and scrubbing off graffiti that would have been unthinkable when she came here as a child.

Officially she is out here to observe these little robots, investigate the controller problems, and confirm their ability to perform maintenance and detect bacterial life. But most of that could have been done from the so-called comfort of her office, or through a VR interface to the game that she has been working on. It is an indulgence, coming out here. She could have waited. But Vibe doesn't wait. She acts.

Hey. Snow is supposed to be good at trapping bacteria and gases. Perhaps she will find some of her kids along the snow line. Best keep plodding up.

*

Plod. Plod.

Approval. Out here again, on the expanse of this range, a shell of urban platitudes seems to separate and lift from her dorsal conscience. It brings with it a clarity of perspective that is unusually humbling. It seems hard to imagine why she has been so wound up about things recently. Troubles with childish boys, posing as men, dreams of men posing as dreams, worries about her work and the possible demise of the project. These ancient mountains hardly care about such trivia and yet they have survived millennia. Surely, if she can survive them, she will live.

Still, she should never forget that she is here on sufferance. Her advisor, or one of the three who are supposedly guiding her in this work, Professor Hart, did not take to the idea of her field work.

She argued with him.

She recalls his face becoming grimmer and grimmer as she felt herself decline in his estimation. Hart, the big man. It was Dr Jonas Lindgren, a well-known ecologist, who had just moved to a position serving on the research council, who defended her. Hart seemed to view her as a perfectly formed chocolate tea-pot, perfect in form and theory, but ready to melt at the first meeting with reality—as soon as she got into hot water. Lindgren, though always distracted and distant, had encouraged her to pursue traditional scientific values of empiricism.

“It could not be more important,” Lindgren said, “especially when you work in the technologies like information science. Engineering is seldom practised as a science these days. It is driven by stupid bureaucrats like I am destined to become, if I stay here too long.”

She is grateful for his moral support. But it was her father, before he died, whose encouragement filled her with the approval to take a chance on her convictions — to pursue science as an adventure, not as a bureaucratic penance, that would bring more aggravation than comfort. He worked then for the Centre of Non-linear Science in San Diego with the Americans and their French colleagues. With Peter Green.

Plod.

Plod.

Vibe’s family has been instrumental in her making. Her father was a simple man who liked nature. Her interest in ecosystems comes from him. He would never have spoken openly of something so pretentious though. Her father was a private man, but his work was something out of the ordinary. Something that she had never felt comfortable asking him about. He was not a military man, but he was visited by a lot of military types: men and women in uniform. She would hole up in her room and play the clarinet when these American visitors came. Later her father would apologize and tell her to be careful around such men. As a twelve year old, she never did fully understand what he was talking about—now she could only guess.

Her mother has always been the intellectual of the family and Vibe is somewhere in between all of her family members.

Her little brother, strangely enough, was her main comfort growing up. She realises that brothers and sisters are not supposed to like each other, but her brother was straightforward and attentive, if nothing else. She played his games with him and they explored VR together when they could no longer get away to see the Real World. Their mother had the bright idea to give them a supplemented education, which kept them more isolated than normal kids of their age. She promised them that they would thank her for it eventually. Her brother made it possible for the apparent chore to be fun. She would help him with his studies; he would help her with her bitterness at being singled out amongst her friends.

She doesn’t hear much from him these days. He spends much of his time

living a lie, brandishing secrecy, evasion and circumlocution in order to prevent anyone, except his closest, from knowing him; specifically from finding out that he is gay. It is sad, she thinks, to invest so much effort in implicit deception. But how is she any better?

‘Vibe’ was also her brother’s joke. It came from her penchant for American accents and her mastery of the clarinet. The Americans could never pronounce her middle name. Her real name is Vibeke, but the Americans pronounce it insistently as if it were part of the anatomy of a duck, so he shortened it with a hip kind of brevity that better fit her sensibility. And her musical interest.

Vibe.

Vibe.

Vibe.

Sara.

Vibeke.

Stensrud.

Duck.

Beak.

America.

What are you thinking?

Then there was Bea. Almost family. They did pretty much everything together once they had finally managed to become friends. They looked at each other skeptically, from afar. Each one presumed that the other was aloof and would not be interested in talking. Each one secretly admired the other.

Vibe.

VeiVek.

Vibe.

Disappointment.

Peter Green.

After her encounter, she forgot about him for a long time. She would tease boys with her newly found sexuality. It was a good way to wrap them around her little finger, or to wrap herself around their little finger if she so desired. Always playing the role, cool Vibe. She and Bea. Until she realized who she was.

Look at me. Just a spoilt bitch. I'm just a freaking cartoon character.

So she studied. Long story. Cut it short. Suddenly, the VeiVeks stopped responding at her terminal. She contacted the American team and asked who was working on the field deployment.

That was when the surprise struck. Peter Green. She saw his picture. It was him. Years later, in a different world, they were to meet again. She had not forgotten her encounter, but it had been consigned to the past. But the temptation seemed too great to resist. Suddenly there were two reasons to come here in person.

How rational is that? Coming here, hoping to re-live a moment of fantasy, that she has undoubtedly amplified beyond all reason in the resonance of her mind? Certainly it is not rational.

But, after all this time, she wants to know what he is really like. The thrill of danger from a safe friend of her father. What more could a girl ask? So why? If only to dispel an adolescent fantasy.

Vibe.

Plod.

Plod.

Vibe.

She treads from boulder to boulder, always with excellent balance and coordination. The steady plodding, the regular breathing, the aching of muscle. This sudorific incantation to the mountain.

*

A whoosh and then a crack that echoes once only in the damp air. A faint fragment of a voice wisps in the wind. She remembers the warning about gangs. The gangs with the paint rifles.

She looks around and sees a splash of yellow paint nearby. The larger VeiVek that she is standing over perks into life as its ocular sensor detects the flagrant colour. It begins to move towards the area, ready to act with its solvents. But it is a hopeless task. This little eco-robot cannot possibly carry enough solvent to wash away this kind of vandalism, even recharging itself regularly from the modified plant sources.

The rain will probably do it eventually. The paint is most likely water based. She considers talking sense into it, but just makes a note to alter their programming later tonight.

Then she sees it.

Another little robot, not far away, hit by a splash of the same paint. Probably it sent a distress signal and this other one has been on its way to the rescue. Now the rescuer is reevaluating its priorities. The rain of paint is throwing the VeiVeks into confusion. It is all happening too fast for them. They expect their world to change slowly, now the environment is changing around them.

She clammers over the uneven ground towards the other robot. It is damaged. Not just discoloured. It has lost a leg and another is broken. Helping it would be useless at this point. It needs to be repaired.

She considers putting its thirty centimetres into her pack to take down to the cabin, but decides against it. Might as well leave it here as a net relay. One thing she has learned is that these robots are actually communicating—working the way she has always intended them to work. Now that their central controller has

gone away, they have started to make the best of what little communication they can to establish contact with their neighbours, to solicit help when needed.

The loss of a central command is actually perfect for her research. The idea was always that, instead of centralized control, they would form a community of collaborating agents, each with their own specializations, and each working independently as part of a collective. A society of mind, as Minsky put it. But NASA and the RKA were against the idea, telling her that it was too uncertain. They wanted a military-style centralization of command and monitoring for the robots. Like Cape Canaveral on ice. Now the central command point has been taken out somehow, or is not working. The little robots have started to communicate with each other instead, just as she had originally planned.

Another shot cracks close by and she hears actual laughter now. Stupid male Neanderthal jerk. She can't stay here.

Another paint-ball lands near to her. Are they shooting at her or at the robots? Shit.

"Fine, herd me fucker."

She pulls out her hand-held to get a better interface and scans for private band com-channels to see if she can get a signal strength. It might tell her how close they are. She can see three networks in addition to the public access point: NRBKN, NLSKN and NASA-VV. She starts at the last of these. It is a signal from one of the VeiVeks. Instantly, she forgets about the immediate threat and attempts to log on to the signal. It accepts her key code and her password and she is admitted to the interface of the robot.

She wonders just how far she could reach into their little network by piggy-backing off their ad hoc internetwork. If she can talk to one, and it can talk to another, who can talk to another across the horizon. . .she might, in principle, be able to access nearly all of the little robots.

She accesses the newcomer and looks at its communications log. It has contact recently with two others. She tries to follow their addresses, but they have moved out of horizon, probably when this one came here to render assistance to the crippled unit.

The status of the two robots seem to be ok, apart from its broken legs.. She attempts to get a picture to see what is going on. She reaches the camera in the larger robot and it is working well. If she could interface to the ad hoc network, she could use the VeiVeks to survey the landscape.

She hears another whoosh and a splash of colour explodes onto the rock some metres away from her. More laughter now, closer. It is clearly her they are targeting. Good thing they are incompetent, probably drunk. Time to get out of here.

She recalls the message she received this morning and takes a moment to echo the gesture by inserting a message into the communications buffer of the

newcomer. Then she adds a backtrack instruction to its priority list and sees it falter in its efforts to cross the boulders, and turn.

The sunlight level is low today, so its power levels are probably low, but it will eventually go back the way it came.

Vibe frees her hands of as much mobile gear as possible. She picks up the broken VeiVek and takes it with her. She will carry it with her a short distance to form a relay closer to the cabin. It might be possible to use it later to access the VeiVeks from the cabin room. Then she turns and skips rapidly across the boulders, in a zig zag, back to the cabin, back the way she came.

11

Blink.

A head turns, face staring up through eyebrows. In the semi-darkness you would be forgiven for thinking her skin was blue. Her skin. Yes, definitely a she. The eyes close for a long moment and re-open. The shadow of long dark hair, pushed behind ears, frames a narrow but attractive face, apparently in need of rest. Skinny blue-brown arms protrude from a lively white sari jumbled with untidy youth and energy. A child? A young woman? *Age can be deceptive, isn't it?* It doesn't matter, either way.

Blink. Preeta knows her limitations, but the computer refuses to play along. She is totally exhausted from these past few days, yet the cursor blinks at her incessantly, waiting for her input. Now! it says, I am ready, what are you waiting for? Type!

Her concentration hovers between the captive screen and every avenue of possible digression, as she tests the boundaries of her fatigue. If she can hold out for just a few hours more, there will be a chance for sleep. She has the night off from the chapati van. If she can just escape from this high tech incarceration.

Outside, palms sway in a late afternoon gust of wind as if rattled by the passing traffic on the carriage-way. She senses a heavy, brooding air mounting the roof of the city, just beyond the glass pane. It brings a slight thrill of nervousness, like an encroaching menace over a Gotham Asia. With the fan in her tiny bedsit broken, it will help to have a cooling force tonight, however inconstant it turns

out to be.

Preeta Dhawan rises from her place amongst the rows of programmers and walks modestly to the washroom to splash some water onto her face. She tries hard to maintain outward appearances here. She must not show that she is weary of the work she has been assigned. She needs to keep this job, at least for now, even if it is causing her some measure of mental anguish. More importantly, she must not show any sign that her boss's intimidations have any effect on her.

The washroom is empty. She is afraid that someone will notice how often she spends here. Fortunately this futuristic domicile is spacious and busy and few have time to pay her much attention. She looks at her greying visage in the high tech mirror. She is tired, yes, but look how far she has come. She has escaped from one oppressive life, moved into two new ones, but she is half way to her dreams, isn't she? Her features are drawn, but a few hours sleep and her charming youth will be restored. If that is the case, why doesn't it feel that way? She stretches her neck muscles.

She feels, these past days, that she understands how a turtle must feel being kept in a box. Her right flipper aches from the typing and the mouse of her computer. Her rear end is numb from sitting. It is made worse since they would not even give her a left handed mouse. She takes a moment to savour the lower light level in the washroom, relieves herself and then she slips out of the washroom into the hallway, to return to her terminal.

"Wait!" shouts a voice from down the hall and she feels a javelin of dread pierce her good fortune. It seems almost inevitable. She turns to look at the fat little man who brought her here and who still holds her captive. "What progress have you made?" He sleazes towards her with an artificial smile. Her boss. He knows that he owns her, having brought her here from the Indian branch, where she started her unlikely career, in Bangalore. He reminds her of it at every opportunity. She calls him Mota. Fat boy.

"Nothing yet," she replies as congenially as she can.

"You'll need to work extra hours to solve this. This contract is very important you know."

"I know," she says. "But I should take a rest soon, you know. You know, approach it with a fresh mind."

"You will do as you are told, girl, isn't it!"

She scowls. "There must be someone else you can ask." She knows there isn't.

"You will stay. There are people coming to inspect our progress. We have deadlines."

"I need to talk to you about something important."

Mota looks straight through her and gestures to someone else. She knows he is listening to her, but there is a way about him that tells her she is incidental,

that she does not matter to him. She is just another piece of machinery in this office. Well, that is about to change, she thinks.

“Later. When you have done your chores,” he mumbles dismissively and wanders away, already focused on someone else.

She looks at him coldly, uncertain whether to hate him or feel sorry for him. She could simply leave. But can she sabotage this flagrant attempt to control her? No. For him it is simply his right. She can see the wheels going around in his supposedly superior head. I do not belong to any caste, she thinks. I belong to society. Nor do I even want to belong to India. I am culturally Asian and that is enough. Don’t look at me that way, you bastard.

He will not deign to touch a computer. He is a Hindu snob. He just gives the orders. Typical that he thinks the computer is just another Untouchable. Stupid primitive. He is like some hopeless bureaucrat trying to be a Bollywood parody of a real man. Alas this little private internal speech does not help her situation. He could find someone else to help her out, but he does not want to. Like her father before him, he sees her as his slave, using guilt to reign her in. As usual, through his own inaction, his refusal to employ more analysts, he manages to get her to do the job. Her conscience is her weakness and she knows it.

But she hates the way he treats her with utter contempt, giving her a look of utmost superiority. Like a servant, or a server. With a little sticker slapped on her forehead “Dalit Inside”. Not that he would recognize one if he saw one or understand what that meant. But she must not let him see it. He is not going to get the better of her mind.

He is abruptly distracted by something else and turns away, seeming to forget about her. She takes the opportunity to slip back to her terminal, out the scope of his radar.

As she walks into the terminal room of this office tower, her gaze extends to the darkening outside world. One can see far from here. The lure of the Padang rises in her. She follows the progress of a solitary tuk tuk amongst the shining air conditioned vehicles as they pass by the Samad. Imagine if she just jumped onto it and asked to be taken to Europe. She has come this far, so why not?

Her glance falls glumly back into the matt sheen of her monitor. There is too much light reflecting in it, giving her a headache, but she cannot spend time worrying about that now. She did not take time out of the University to feel sorry for herself. She needs the money and she is working on a bonus.

She has been working on this particular job now for months. The program is coming along, but tracking this bug has led her nowhere. Even a wild goose chase would be preferable to this insufferably endless game of cricket. Her only trump card is that she is actually good at her job. Whatever shortcuts she has had to take in her education, she has surprised herself in finding her calling: analysis. That is why he needs her. I am good, she thinks.

At least she has a home here. After all, in her family's eyes she is dead. The nightmare is still there, in the forefront of her mind, even after all this time. The whole journey. Shame and dishonour, unleashed by an impassioned refusal. Propelled from an ordinary family home, into unforgiving streets of Srinagar, with only the clothes on her back and the merest hope of escape. Some connection to her past died at that point, as though a binge on some alcoholic dream finally damaged her brain with a selective loss of emotion so that she could turn her back and leave without regrets. And yet it was the indulgent folly of her enquiring mind that brought her here, along an unlikely trail, far from that shepherded upbringing to this virtual sweat shop, to a new and completely different country. But that was almost seven years ago, and there is no time for this day-dream.

She begins to scan through the code where she left off, adding tracers. Preeta has never been much of an artist, but she can admire some of the newer fragments of code, like stanzas of poetry, that illuminate the passages of hackery in the original program. They stand out. She has been programming now for three years, but she does not feel yet that she has found a style that she can live by. Programming is almost like a lifestyle. The code she writes says something about her basic attitudes.

These nested loops, have a certain strange beauty to them. There is no fat, every statement is a precise and minimal instruction to the kernel exec. There is a push and pull, a question and answer, a conversation going on that she finds fascinating. Never would she have imagined that such a program might be possible. The complexity alone is breathtaking—and yet she understands it, piece by piece, verse by verse. She almost feels that she can play the game in her own mind, but by reading these logical statements on the monitor in front of her.

The ticking revolutions of a watch's hand meet her casual glance on screen two. The test program is still running with only one tenth of the modules loaded. Without this amount of simplification, she would be unable to run a simulation at all.

She sighs in frustration. Any normal girl would be surrounded by her girlfriends chatting about romance and manipulating men, but Preeta is not any normal girl and she has had her fill of manipulation. For ten years of her life her father ruled her by guilt from his wheelchair.

Her teachers have taught her the power of simulation here at the University in Kuala Lumpur, and she has found that it is a considerable help in figuring out the chains of cause and effect within the program. Most of her studies at the University have been simulations. Malaysia is not a poor country, but funds for education are always limited. Besides, Preeta has always enjoyed fantasy and using her imagination.

The levels fluctuate up and down madly. The power spectrum is almost down to 1.5 – a long way off exponential. She has been told to expect this, and her

comparisons with the limited data that she has been given by the contractor confirm this. What is strange is that the queue lengths are not growing significantly, but the CPU load is at such a low level. Everything is taking a long time. Instead of rising to the provocation like a hive of angry wasps, this simulation is merely grinding along more like a windmill in a light breeze.

This is not going to happen today. Wait! There it is again! On the output log, a message appears.

She recognizes the message. She has seen it several times lately. They have started to appear quite often now. In the logs the program is complaining, "No exit this way. Better backtrack and try again."

At first the message seemed to defy explanation. It did not sound like a programming message, or an error condition. What could have caused it? What was it asking for? Then her curiosity is piqued. She begins to search in the code base, using her analyst access to access the module docs. She discovers that the message is not an error message at all. It comes from the game itself. The message is advice to the VR players in a tactical setting. It is telling them to change their tactics.

Now it is appearing in the logs, perhaps due to some buffer overflow or memory error. The message is clearly an error, but ironically appropriate. Backtracking is exactly what they now must do in order to solve this mystery. They will want this fixed. Their employers see the game as too important to leave it alone. She smiles at the thought of the game actually playing its programmers.

A lone siren wails outside.

*

The sky has shrunk into a dark glove around Kuala Lumpur as the incoming message registers on her console. There is little more than reflection to be seen through the windows of the programmers' den now. Her reflection is drawn and weary. Preeta tenses with a mixture of excitement and trepidation at the continuation of this adventure. Suddenly she does not regret having to stay late.

She has been exchanging messages with this mystery X who calls himself JP for weeks, even months, passing on her findings. All that she knows is that this person works for the game consortium, or at least has access to its private channels. She chooses the game silent mode as always; she cannot talk aloud here in the den. Also, she routes the visual to her glasses for privacy. No one could suspect that she is not still debugging.

She finds herself in a small room that looks like a cafe.

"It has been a while," she says. "I thought you had gone away."

"Had to lie low for a while – when the story broke. Even though it was expected eventually, it was not supposed to come out this fast."

"So why now?"

"I need your help again."

"I think I know what you are going to ask."

"Good."

"This is exciting"

Pause. There is a long wait. Are they sizing her up, or is her counterpart actually a computer program?

"I could make it more exciting. You could really help us."

"Maybe you could get me a job in the U.S.?"

"You want to work somewhere else? The good life? Beautiful women?"

She smiles. The person, if it is one, does not know that she is a woman. Naturally she appears as a man in VR.

"Sure. Beautiful women. :)"

There is another pause.

"The U.S. is not good. Europe is best. We can move you if you are ready."

"Why not the U.S.?"

"Public interest."

"Which public?"

"The whole world."

"I won't be doing anything un-ethical?"

"You have already done the most ethical thing you can by helping me out."

A slight thrill runs down her spine. How can she be even entertaining this idea?

"I'm ready, Thelma" she says.

The avatar smiles back. "Are you female?"

She nods.

"Well, hot damn."

"You are not a computer program?"

"No. LOL."

There is a pause again. Her boss is hovering close by.

"I'll see what I can do."

"Now look, be careful. Someone might come looking for you soon."

"Wait. Someone coming." She pauses the session.

Claire Thambusamy comes over to her terminal. "Preeta, can you look at this?" Claire is her friend. She has been searching the files of the American consortium database for several days now to see if they can confirm their suspicions.

"Claire, not now. I'll come by in a moment."

She pauses, sending her an enquiring glance, and then nods and leave again. Preeta snaps the session back on.

"Ok, sorry."

"As we speak, people are meeting half way across the world to turn this into the biggest vehicle for propaganda since the invention of radio."

"I know," she says. "But I don't think it is going to work."

"The programmers at the Norwegian office seem to be pretty much in the dark about all of this. They are only working on the modules. They probably have not seen what is happening in the field."

"Really? Interesting. I'll follow up on that."

"And there is this message that is cropping up everywhere. I think I am starting to understand what is going on."

"A message? From a user?"

"From the exec. I've seen it in the game, you know. How the rules of the game allow players to make sudden transformations of behaviour. It is what I want for myself, you know. It says, 'backtrack and leave'".

"Time to go now," says X. "Back soon."

His presence dissolves and she exits from the channel too, left feeling disappointed.

Preeta feels a chill, suddenly alone with a secret that is too big to keep. In this city, it does not feel right to be living a step ahead of anyone. Better to be a shadow, anonymous and invisible. The way that she has been for half of her life.

*

Some say that fortune blows in on a cool sea breeze. Tonight there is considerable fortune on the wind, for the unwary Preeta, though she does not know the half of it. That a fragment of an idea, half held in a moment of inspiration could steer the course of an unencumbered human being, from one side of the planet to another, hardly bears serious consideration, and yet this is what is about to transpire in the most peculiar of ways for her. As usual, she is sitting at her terminal in the programmers' den.

From her place, she can see along the corridor to a Caucasian looking man with short clipped hair and what looks like a suit recently made in Bangkok to a blueprint whose sell-by date expired in the 1970s. Yesterday it was an oriental, perhaps Vietnamese hanging around.

He is watching us, she thinks. No. He is watching me! The man has been loitering with an unconvincing, almost studied disinterest for an hour now in the lobby. She is surprised that no one has come to meet him. He seems to be studying the room plan on the wall beside the secretary, Monika, as if looking for someone by name. Eventually Mota waddles out to and talks to him. They talk for several minutes and they both turn and look at the terminal room, but at no one in particular. Then they talk some more and Mota leaves the man. Just before he himself leaves, he turns to look at her one more time.

Mota comes over to her; she smells his sweaty odour home in on her.

“We need someone to take these welcome packages to the hotel where our guests will be arriving tomorrow. You will have to do. You can leave early.”

Early! she thinks, failing to protest publicly.

“Who was that man? What did he want?”

“Mind your business, girl! We keep you here for your womanly charms, not for your questions.”

Little does he understand, she thinks.

“Now, pack your things, they will be arriving. And there is one more thing.”

She looks at him without speaking.

“I want you to persuade them that we can do the job.” Then he continues: “You are a young girl and if you want to help us all here you will entertain them and work through the night to get this all done. It is absolutely necessary that we impress them.”

“What exactly are you asking?”

Another siren. What kind of city is she living in?

*

Preeta steps out of the chill of the air conditioning into the hot soupy moisture of the evening. She could get a cab from here, but she feels like walking. It has been too long since she felt the wind on her face.

She traverses the stone pavement towards the central reservation of the main road ahead, letting the cold ache of her air conditioned bones be replaced by the sweaty glow of Kuala Lumpur's true air condition.

The white arches of the Mosque and its palm sentinels gape at her as she crosses the busy road.

Traffic, traffic. Bustle and fumes.

Allah, do you remember me?

What would your punishment be for one like me?

Her head spins with thoughts and fears, excitement and uncertainty. Who has really been betrayed? Who is the victim? Is she really redeeming herself now through this secrecy? Should she feel ten feet tall, or as crooked as a roach?

The night's choir sings its woes as the streets slides past. This brooding torrent of sleep-deprived events orbits, not far from her conscious mind.

Preeta reaches the lobby of the hotel Shang-ri La just before 20:00. The splendour of the hotel seems somewhat beyond her means. She feels instantly underdressed compared to the sleek attire of the hotel clerks. The space-age curves and expensive looking art are practically dizzying. The decorated floor makes her wish she had expensive shoes.

The bundle she is carrying feels ridiculous to her. Full of useless leaflets about their company. It is as if these people are helpless tourists. They will no

doubt take a taxi to the office tomorrow, like anyone in their right mind would. Why is she here then?

She approaches the desk and requests to leave a package for a Mr. Brown. The visitors have already checked in. Is she late? No, they are early. The desk clerk points to them. They are sitting in the bar lounge, just a short distance away. She curses fate and looks at her own attire. How inappropriate is she? She considers leaving.

The visitors are a man and a woman. His accent is American and hers is European perhaps, but she has dark eyes, skin and hair. She looks almost Indian except for her curls.

"Hello," she says. "My name is Preeta Dhawan. I am from the office here. I was not expecting you to be here yet. Please forgive my dress."

"Our plane arrived somewhat early. The jet-stream was in our favour and we were given a landing slot straightaway. Lucky."

They ask her if she will join them and retire into the Horizon Lounge.

She wants to hide her face. "I could not. Forgive my attire. I came here straight from the office to give you these. I hope you don't think me rude."

She hands the man the package; the woman takes it.

"It is some directions and information about getting to the office tomorrow. But you must be very tired now."

"Oh don't worry. We have slept a little on the flight. You must be tired yourself."

Is it so obvious? Can they see the lines around her eyes, around her weary soul? Preeta's expression conceals nothing of her agreement. "I am."

She looks at the woman's dress, wishing that she could hold it in her hands and feel its rough texture. The textile is so unlike the shiny silks of Asia. Yet this woman's skin is far more like those shiny silks, except for tiny golden hairs than glisten slightly in the bright fluorescent light.

"We are looking forward to visiting tomorrow and hearing about your progress. We have some new plans to unveil."

They ask her what her position is. She answers them that she is a senior analyst for the company.

"And you are working so late?"

"My boss takes the company very seriously," she pries out. She feels utterly exhausted, as though she is fainting in a dream. They can see it. She is ashamed. They look concerned. This was not the impression she ought to be giving. Mota's desire to push her around comes before his greater common sense, she thinks,

"Your boss should take better care of you, if he does not want to lose you."

"My boss is a fool! It would serve him right!"

She immediately regrets her pompous outrage. Revenge might be a motive but it is a response to someone else's motivation, not hers. She will not be such

putty in his hands.

"I am sorry. It has been a long day. Forgive me! That was very rude."

The guests smile.

"We are flattered that your company thinks so highly of us," they say cordially.

Of course you are. Asia will do anything to placate the West. It is such a two faced hypocrisy: while condemning Europe's Imperial past, they sign on to the new so-called global empire of commerce. Global, except that it is controlled by the U.S. and the E.U.. But she must not allow her passions to rule her.

They are polite after all.

So should she be.

*

As she steps out of the hotel, she looks up at the sky and feels a certain relief flood through her. Her duties for the day are over; she has survived it; she can go home and sleep.

As she reaches the end of the drive-way, she turns onto Jalan Raja. A screech of tyres roars above the choral night, and there is a commotion in the street.

People scatter from the path as an aging white van pulls up at high speed. She watches disbelievingly as it approaches. It seems detached somehow from reality, as if it were part of a sim or something in the VR.

This is the real world, isn't it?

The van skids to a halt right in front of her, the back doors fly open. She staggers backwards a little, as two men jump out and run towards her. Behind her she vaguely hears someone run around the other side of the van behind her. Are they police? What is happening? Her world seems to slow to a treacle of dazed speculation as she watches them jump out; feet hit the tarmac, legs bend and absorb the shock; a head turns and dark eyes blaze through her; his mouth opens, body straightens and aims itself like an arrow through her chest. He is heading for some place behind her and there is danger there. She starts to turn her head to see what commotion is stalking her.

Someone throws something dark over her head and all dreaminess is shattered by the reality of physical contact. She feels a jolt and a suffocating proximity. Hands push her, hurt her. She finds herself bundled forcibly into the rear of the van, unable to see. She tries to scream or cry out, but she has never tried it before and it hardly seems to be in her nature; the feeblest hint of protestation emanates from her.

Voices around her sound almost Russian, but not quite. She can no longer remember the face that she saw. Her brain is drowning in adrenalin. She might consider listening more carefully, but more pressing matters call for her attention in her hindbrain.

She feels naked under her thin attire, and all too exposed to the men who are holding her down. She feels hands on her her thigh. There must be at least two of them, Suddenly she fears for her virtue. Is this to be it? The moment that innocence is wrenched from her without grace or passion? She could at least be grateful that she is no longer anywhere near her homeland, or her next fate would no doubt be an ad hoc funeral pyre.

There is clanking as she is dragged into the metal van, and she feels the rough corrugations of the floor of the van press into her back. Her head hits something and then men are holding her by her ankles, preventing her from writhing. She is pinned down like a butterfly in a collection.

The van takes off at high speed and swerves around several bends. The van is speeding through the streets, anonymous and nocturnal. It is one of a thousand vans of its description, with nothing special to identify it, nothing to pin-point her in the city's folds.

She is tossed from side to side, as if the very hands, which are clasping her limbs, are shaking her. The swerving subsides, as if the van is driving in more of a straight line, but the white flames of fear explode inside her as the strong hands holding her legs and ankles pull apart her legs.

Allah the merciful, please no!

A hand reaches up into her sari and tugs down on the front of her panties. It remains there for a while, as if they are making a judgement about her, discussing her as she is forced to wait.

Something scrapes her leg and she tenses and almost manages to scream. But expectation fails in its threat; she feels a knuckle on her genitalia, which remains there for several seconds. Then something sharp or prickly thrust into her panties. The hand lets go of the elastic, snapping the panties shut and leaving a cool presence touching her most private of places. A hammering on the van wall brings the van to an abrupt halt, bashing her head into the wall behind her.

The men slide her along and throw her out of the van. She lands badly on the hard road surface, twisting a wrist, and blindfolded by the garment over her. Even though the fall was short, she finds herself paralyzed with shock, with no idea where she is or what lifting the head covering might reveal about her surroundings. She has hit her head several times.

For a moment the world is white and ablaze, then slowly the rushing sound of water reveals itself to be merely an illusion that her mind has conjured. The waves of nausea and the blinding numbness segue into a more normal reality; the burning cools, the world returns and sounds begin to manifest themselves through the fading rush of the tide.

She hears the sound of people around her. As it slowly sinks in it brings some comfort. Then she hears an American voice, "Jesus, did you see that. Hey – are you all right?"

She hears a boy shout, "Mummy, mummy, look!"

Sound clearing, vision returning.

A British woman shrieks in return. "Micky, get away from there, right now. Come here!"

No Micky, help me.

"Micky – now! Come here." She hears nothing more.

Then she hears an American voice.

"My god, ma'am! Are you all right?"

The man's voice does not run away. She wants to reply, but she is still too shocked. The voice seems kind. There is sympathy. She is so tired. Americans.

"Careful. You look a little shook up." Man.

"Can we take you somewhere." Woman.

Slowly, over a time she cannot comprehend, the world returns and she believes that she has been dreaming.

There is a little cafe with cheap Formica tables close by. They help her out of the road and almost carry her to the cafe. She breathes slowly and evenly, but every movement wracks pain from her thin frame.

"Thank you," she musters, remembering herself.

"My god, you poor thing. What happened? Do you know those people?"

"We should call the police."

"I need to use the rest room," she sobs. She does not think she has fouled herself, but she needs to be alone. She needs to remove whatever it is they put inside her panties.

"But we should call the police."

"No, no. Please, let me "

She enters the little cafe. The owner has come out to look at her and, seeing that something has happened, ushers her inside. The Americans follow her. She feels a shield of protection for the moment, but the world is suddenly not the one she knew a few minutes ago. It seems as though she is a tourist, or that she has undertaken a journey. She finds the room.

Inside the little cubicle, she slowly unwraps her sari and looks down at her skinny hips. Her panties a bulging open with the scrunched up paper. Irrationally, she hopes that they did not see her unshaven crotch. As she looks down at herself, she thinks about escaping from this place, from her heritage, from her life—to a place where she could have herself and wear fine perfumes and sleep for six hours at a time.

Sobbing now, she removes the paper carefully and unfolds it, half expecting something to fall out. It is a simple note written on scrunched paper, nothing more. It is hand written. It says simply. "You work for us now. Keep your mouth shut and tell no one. You will receive further instructions."

She stares at it in terror. How could this be happening to her? It is like something from a movie. She begins to sob uncontrollably and hot salty tears run down her face. She wishes that she could go home to her mother and be held in her arms. And be forgiven.

Then her cold iron mettle gradually kicks in and her face straightens until only resigned bitterness remains. That is not going to happen and she is used to running for her life.

She straightens up and adjusts her clothing and her eyes. She still has her small bag and there are tissues here in the washroom. She makes the best of a lost cause and summons herself to return to the world.

As she emerges, she sees the Americans waiting for her. They are still here. She has almost forgotten about them already.

"My dear, sit down awhile," says the woman.

The man says, "We bought you some tea. Do you have a home? If you need to call the police. . ."

"No, no. I have to go. Please, leave me alone."

She instantly feels guilty for resenting their ineptitude. They do not fail her out of malice, only helplessness.

"I'm sorry. I can take a taxi. Please, thank you for your help."

"Well we are going to follow you there. If you need to clean up, you are welcome to come to our hotel. It's just around the corner from here."

"No. You are very kind. I'll be fine."

They look at each other uncomfortably, as though they are not doing their solemn duty. "Well, okay then, but you mustn't be afraid to ask if there is anything we can do."

"No, thank you." She smiles at them, as well as she is able and flees their presence.

Back in her little bedsit, she lowers herself carefully onto the mattress and suppresses some tears. What exactly is it that just happened to her?

Later, she allows herself to sleep.

*

When she returns to the office, Mota looks at her with a curious horror as though he perceives that something has happened. For a moment she wonders if . . . no, even this bloodsucking tyrant would not sell his humanity to such a bidder. No, there are surely physical signs of her ordeal that she has not been able to conceal. He can see that something has happened. But, that is not it either.

"Where have you been?" he demands. "Our guests have been here for an hour or more. What has happened to you?"

The guests! She has completely forgotten about them. Even now, after hours of sleep, her body is deadened by an exhaustion and apathy that she cannot overcome. She wants to be good, but her physical incarnation is fading.

"You cannot remain here in that state, girl!" he moans. "What the bloody hell has happened to you? You are late for the meeting."

"I must talk to you about what is going on," she blurts. She has tried before, but actually, what is the point? "There is a problem in the game that we can't solve."

"Don't be silly, girl. All problems can be solved with a little imagination. If you clean yourself up, and see a doctor, you'll be in . . ."

"I can't fix it."

"If we do not, we shall not be able to meet the goals set by PlasmaScape."

"We are going to lose this contract," she tells him.

And for the first time, in a long time, she feels the hot blaze of his unequivocal stare.

"You must go home. And do not come back."

Surely he cannot mean it, after all they have been through?

"You cannot dismiss me!" she barks back. "I am the one knows what is going on here!"

"Then you will just have to put someone else in the picture."

He is sacking her. He wouldn't dare.

She could fight it. She knows the ropes. She has not fought in causes for nothing. But, as the shock of the redundancy wavers, the spectre of suspicion creeps its way from her fluttering stomach into a white pain in her temples. She realizes what she must do.

She goes to her desk and reconnects, tries to locate her online friend.

"Help me. I need a job. I need help." She explains what has happened.

They say: "Pick one: U.K., Holland, Norway. "

She misses the mountains from her childhood – but she might even have family in Norway. "U.K."

"Ok—Norway it is. There is a project there that you can work on. But it should be soon. Someone wants to find you. I want to keep you hidden."

She was planning to stay here for some years to earn enough money to travel. Now it seems those plans are forfeit. As she is thinking, a letter arrives. It comes within minutes of her conversation; it comes from Mota.

She looks at the letter with a strange kind of awe, holding it as though it were toxic parchment, with a mixture of reverence and revulsion. The letter is simple and to the point. It informs her that her services will no longer be required at the company of PlasmaScape Asia.

She knows what she must do. She hastens to copy her data and extract the necessary information before her authorizations are revoked.

Then she takes up the offer. The Europeans. It is almost too much of a coincidence, but why does she care? She was saving to travel and now she can. An electronic letter arrives in her mailbox and it is copied to Mota, even before he can make her unemployment official. It signals her transfer out of the country.

So Preeta, just twenty-three years old, is going to Europe.

12

“And you will not help them?”

She smiles in defiance. “I have never known a day when I did not awaken to an enthusiasm for my job—to leash the people to their obligations through the wonders of taxation.” Laughter.

“The trouble is that it is the rich who have been responsible, in their tribulations, to make this country a better place to live in. It is the poor who let us down and create a burden.”

“Those and the women, who have never worked.” An uncomfortable look: eyes move back and forth seeking approval in the faces around him. How curiously unsettling to realize that your long held prejudice is starting to wane from the public consciousness, that one is no longer guaranteed a sympathetic ear for a choice folly.

“You male-chauvinist bastard,” laughs the woman, too inebriated to care.

Den emerges from the private room a little dazed, edging past this conversation. There seems to be some kind of commotion. People seem to be leaving.

“Mr. Morris?” A voice arrests him as he finds his bearings.

A military man, out of uniform, but still wearing one in his mind, approaches, together with the General he met earlier.

“Let me introduce you to Senator Dean,” he says, his voice a sound like shovelling gravel.

“So you are the young man I have been hearing about.” Grey hair, lean. Moustache. Alcoholic basso profaino.

Den shakes his hand. “Hello.”

“I have been hearing about your work on the directed imaging and it seems to me that you have your finger on the trigger.”

"Well, I wouldn't have used exactly those words. . ." A little smile.

"Walk with us. Let's retire to a quieter place."

The idea of escape appeals strongly. Den scans the room for Cathy Kim. His feet tell him that this would be a good time to sit down, but he should not just abandon her. She has been trying out the drinks all day and she is probably doing the same now.

"I shall probably be working with a lady I met at the conference," he adds, glancing around. "She works here in San Diego at the game research facility. Perhaps we should include her. . ."

"Yes, I saw you together," his voice a smile. "But not this time. When a man comes to work for national security, they sow buttons on his lip. The ladies were always pretty good and undoing buttons, if you get my drift. We should keep this to ourselves for now."

"Am I going to be working for the military?" he says carefully.

"A distinct possibility, Morris. I think we can come to an arrangement that will be of great interest to you."

Den gets a closer look at his uniform than he cares to see. It is an ugly fabric, like some cheap, used stretch fabric in a faded colour. "Well, we are quite busy at the moment, but we always have resources to take on new challenges."

"Excellent. Come on. let's go through here."

He walks with a politician's confidence through a house that he makes his own simply by being in it. He seems to know where to go and what to do. Den admires his air of command, his apparent composure. A man in a dark suit trails them from a distance. The senator barks an instruction to him. "Get me the British guy and Bob. We need them in the library right away."

They enter a small library, and the suit closes the door behind them. He redirects to Den. "Sit down. Take a seat." He seats himself next to a dark-wood table, befitting for a senator. The room seems to accept him, as a cell would a virus. He slots neatly into a receptor meant for something else.

"Son. your speech was good, but it missed the point."

"Really?"

"That might be harsh. Let me tell you how I see it." He takes the time to wave some signal to the suit with the earplug. "We are all here to talk about this game technology. And to address all this hoo-hah about its political motivations, as you know: rumours started by a disgruntled part of our society to undermine the good work we are supporting."

Expectation on the senator's face suggests the need for a response, but Den is tired. He waves his head in non-committal receptivity.

"Let me be direct. We, in the civilized world, are under attack today. By forces we hardly understand." His eyes blaze probing holes in Den's head, but Den is an experienced manager of his appearance. He is not ready to divulge his

opinion yet. Dean proceeds, brashly: "It started with the millennium and it has been growing in its sophistication every since. Groups in the developing world who hate America, its democracy and its superiority in industry; that and left wing element of the anti-globalization, anti-Western activists. They are doing real damage to our society. We have kept this anti-freedom activity under control for a long time, but then with the failure of the Patriot act and the civil liberties trials undermining our powers in reigning in the terrorists, our main crisis today has become the breakdown of order. There are too many media channels for a society to support a sense of identity."

"Yes," Den adds, in a momentary pause for breath. "It is the theory of virtual nations. We use it in our advertising models. People are condensing into smaller groups through common interests, using the media channels and the Internet. The sense of national identity is reduced as a result of that. They fight back with separatism, and foster a hatred of others."

"So they tell me. But I don't completely buy it. We have always had a free press and the Internet has been around for a long time. That did not prevent Americans from being loyal to the constitution before. If you ask me, I think it is tied to the decline in the armed forces. All this so-called redevelopment in commercial use of the network will all be in vain if we cannot protect American from the insurgents."

"The insurgents."

"Don't you watch the news? We have major unrest in Seattle and in New York. . ."

"The demonstrations? Well, add South China sea, South America, European separatists, the mid East."

"Yes, the demonstrations." A tremor of annoyance belies the extent of his intoxication. One has to admire his posture in such a reduced state. Den decides to hold off on any judgement, given his obvious condition. "The police are authorized to use tear gas, but it doesn't help much. These people are organized. They want a free lunch, and they have forgotten what it means to be patriotic!"

"We have been looking at ways to change the law," the General adds.

"Changing the law?"

"Yes. But there is resistance amongst the judicial system. Even the government's own men in the judiciary are reluctant to help." He points to a plaque on the wall of the library, next to a poster of former presidential busts.

Congress shall make no law respecting an establishment of religion,
or prohibiting the free exercise thereof; or abridging the freedom
of speech, or of the press; or the right of the people peaceably to
assemble and to petition the Government for a redress of grievances.

“Yes, quite,” Dean mumbles. “It all seemed to clear back then. The recipe for oppression is individual rights. But it’s the paradox of having to limit freedoms to grant freedoms: that is what the law is about. But let’s not get into that here. Poor Mr. Morris will think we’re wasting his time with politics.”

“Oh, don’t mind me,” Den quips to deflect from the embarrassment of the admission. “I am happy to take the weight off my feet for a few minutes.”

“All this game talk is a good initiative, but it needs to be used more thoughtfully. I believe we should view this technology like a training sim, to expose young people to the rigours of discipline from an early age. To the chain of command. All right, I know there are popular locations like the Iraqi war-fields where there is virtual tourism, of whatever they call it. But we need to tie it to discipline. There is no conception of it today, and we see the country going to hell.”

“Research shows that computer games encourage skills like problem solving and manual dexterity, concentration. . .”

“Then why aren’t our kids growing up to be decent law abiding citizens?”

Den shrugs. “I know of several theories. . .”

“Any minute now they will call me out to declare Marshall law in the state of New York or Washington, and I will not have sufficient resources to take charge. The chain of command, in our country, has become muddled.”

Den considers his options. He is uncertain of his role here. Is he being approached to do something? Caution could be called for.

“Well, you know, we actually spend a lot of time in our company working out what we call ‘command pathways’ in our imaging. You know, how to push people’s buttons, the power of suggestion.”

“Is that a fact?” the General quips, with comic lack of surprise.

Of course, he is expected. “I suppose that is why I’m here. . . If you are interested, I could arrange a presentation, showing. . .”

The senator changes track. “I want you to remember the service you are doing to millions of kids around the world who look up to the ideals of freedom and justice. You are empowering them to take control of their lives with this game. I don’t need to be involved in the details. I just want you to ally with the goals of this administration. We need to mold the players of these sims into decent, moral people. We need to spread traditional American values. And Britain has always been our ally and has shared those values.”

Den wonders if it is really true that he is empowering the game’s players, or whether he is simply programming them to do the US military’s bidding. But, this is not the time for moral qualms. He has a business to run.

“I am sure the scenarios we create are entertaining to them, and that gives them a sense of escapism, and a means of experiencing a wider world. That is

why most of the game is set in a facsimile of the real world. The aim is not to take poor families out into outer space.” He laughs.

“Entertaining isn’t the half of it, son. We would not have started this project if it were not for the benefit this will have to hundreds of thousands, eventually millions of people all over the world, in bringing them closer to a free world. Our aim with this project was not just to be nice to our allies and our enemies’ oppressed peoples, but to bring the message of freedom, America’s core values, to the very fore of consciousness. To show them what it means to have freedom of speech.”

“That seems like a noble effort.”

“It is noble, that’s for sure. It is also necessary. Never before have these countries been in a better position to threaten American sovereignty.”

The General coughs artificially.

“Our moral superiority, our values. We have given them nuclear weapons, biological and chemical weapons, our information technology, our industrial techniques.”

Probably Japan and Europe played a role, Den thinks, but he does not interrupt.

“It is the West’s destiny to lead the world into its future. We practically own the future. America is in the lead—it always has been, but our righteous governance is slipping away because we are not keeping the peace.” He eyeballs the General. “This game has only two useful purposes: to provide us with communications intelligence and to spread the West’s moral values to the rest of the planet.”

“I have heard about these goals. Though they have never been stated quite that bluntly to me.”

“I feel that you are on our side, Morris. You have clearances for a lot of the data streams. You’ll filled out the NDAs. You are a team player and I hear that you are doing good work with your team in the U.K.”

“Thank you.”

A knock at the door breaks his momentum; the suit opens up for a shorter, wider man. They look expectantly to see who it is, framed by the doorway.

“Hello, Bob.”

“What’s this about?” he asks. Seeing Den, he nods. “Ah, I see. I thought we we’re going to wait.”

The senator uses the interruption as an excuse to visit one of the left-over trays from the dinner. “Brandy anyone? Bob?”

“No.” Grumpily. “Hello, Mr. Morris. Congratulation on your talk.”

“Thank you.”

“I was just telling Den about our ideas.”

"That might be a little premature. Not something to be discussed at this late hour over brandy."

"Ah, an essential freedom, Bob."

Den offers his hand.

"Time for me to leave," says the General and nods to excuse himself. "Good luck, Den."

Den looks at him, hardly having time to digest his meaning.

"The fact is," Dean continues, "we need new measures for law and order. We are looking at reports of civil unrest in several parts of the country, and in Germany and the Netherlands."

Den speaks up, deciding that he needs to remain outwardly confident to deal with this unusual, impromptu meeting. "I have heard reports on the news channels. I thought it was some kind of lobby group phenomenon. An outgrowth of the anti-globalization riots."

"Well, that might be true, but they are increasingly organized. And in spite of the work of our intelligence agencies, we have not been able to tie them to any particular known disruptive organization. If I were a terrorist, I would use this kind of cover to further my cause."

"Terrorism is usually bombs and guns, senator," says Bob, who still has not introduced himself.

The senator ignores him. "People not only have private channels, but they are increasingly disenfranchized with the politics of civil society. They are dragging us into the ghetto, the slums. Increasing in mob activity. Organized crime. We need every possible means to counter these threats. If we don't, our police forces will no longer be effective. Should we call in the army on our own people? Will we degenerate into an old Soviet style state?"

Bob turns to Den. "I am Bob Regis. Secretary of the information agency. We know of your work for us." He sighs and gestures towards the senator, who is sampling his brandy. "There is a lot of truth in what the senator says. Mafia's and mobs. They need poverty to succeed. Protection rackets. Look at Naples—it is a poor region. Russia. He is right about that much. We are at a critical juncture."

"It is cultural terrorism," Dean moans.

"We are looking at ways of using the same techniques that we have employed in information warfare to curb these developments," Regis adds. "You see in the past we have been focusing on reprisals—going in and taking out key targets with smart bombs. But that has never been an effective measure and it is actually harming us now in our goals."

"What about fines, sanctions?" adds Den.

"Sanctions are useless. For a start, it only works on governments or companies. These people are not usually that organized. Secondly, it was never any punishment to them. You can't subdue people based on a threat if the threat

doesn't work. These people are used to living with pain and hardship. They can't keep their own lives together for five minutes, how would the threat of chaos move them? Regular policing doesn't work. It just starts a physical war with barricades arsenals and fortresses in the poor regions. We have seen it in New York and Naples with the mafia and in Iraq in Fellujah, with the Afghan Mujahadeen in the mountain regions. . ."

"Our aim is more subtle than that," Regis says philosophically. "We like to think of it as attitude engineering. You know, it's what you do with your teenage kids, when they start getting unruly." He laughs. "It is a more long term battle of hearts and minds. Something that we have not done very well in the past. It has taken Congress years to understand that we need the help of our allies to tap into the nation psyches of our neighbours. We need to be able to think like them to know their soft spots."

"Of course, we have our foot in their doors already with corporate America's strong position in the soft drinks and fast food markets," Dean suggests.

"Well, they are of more symbolic importance than anything else. In some places they even harm us."

"Attitude engineering has many philosophies and many angles," Den inserts. "That's what I do."

"We owe a debt of gratitude to the churches here," Dean says. "They have been generous in their support of this initiative and have taught us a lot about addressing these issues."

"There is the IPA," Regis corrects.

"They are too goddamned intellectual."

Den guesses that they are talking about the Institute for Propaganda Analysis, but he is always amazed by how Americans talk in three letter abbreviations without realizing they have many possible interpretations: what about the Institute of Practitioners in Advertising, or the International Phonetic Association, which he has often arrived at by accident himself, in looking for the former.

"Half of our votes belong to the Evangelical churches. They have a lot of votes. We have to serve their interests first."

Den is slightly taken aback. "I really didn't know that there was a direct involvement with the religious organizations."

"So now you are privy to our little group."

"We are really working with the church?"

"No. Not a single church. They are just involved in this project to lend it some moral fibre—and some technical advice. They have been doing attitude engineering longer than most of us. They are a partial substitute for our lacklustre political institutions. But don't worry, you don't have to believe to be on the team."

"But the government is involved. . ."

“No. The White-house cannot be directly involved in this game, nor can Whitehall. The French would eat us alive if they made a connection. So don’t go saying that too loudly.”

“Then what?”

“We are keeping this as a hands-off venture. We handle it just like we handle all these deals. We have family connections and we make sure it is profitable for the right people.”

“But, we can’t manage this all alone. We have already been this road.”

“Yes, Bob, and our dependency on foreign contractors threatens our agenda. How can we trust these people to uphold American moral standards? It is an open invitation for the mob to move in on it, for terrorists to corrupt it. We don’t even hold the power of veto on changes anymore. What the hell were they thinking?”

“Unfortunately that is the meaning of democracy,” Regis points out.

“Bob, you’re an ass sometimes. Have I ever told you that?”

Regis winks at Den. “Often, senator.”

“I say we should keep a firm hand in this technology. I don’t like power sharing. The more you dilute your assets, the less effective they are. We should consider affirmative action measures like withdrawing patent protections on certain inventions for national security. The private sector can only be rewarded if they serve America’s primary interests.”

“I think that would be a mistake. I repeat my suggestion of granting patent rights only to trusted U.S. companies. It is in the best interests of everyone involved that these businesses have the right to make money.”

“Surely the government can better regulate these matters?”

“We do it by deregulation and pricing. And a little under the table incentive. That’s the way we have always done things. I don’t see any reason to stop now. It is every patriotic industrialist’s basic right to be able to profit from the generation of wealth. It is the basic platform in which our country is based.”

“Yes, I agree. It would be a dangerous path to tread if we were to begin reducing the freedoms of businesses that contribute to government’s own funds.”

The senator focuses on Den. “Mr. Morris. Let’s focus here. We need your help. You are going to be the man of the moment for a little while at least. I want you to help us get to grips with this content management. We have a serious problem to solve. Forget about our difficulties for a moment, and think about the possibilities. Now that the press is on alert, we have to be even more relentless in our pursuit of these goals. Every opportunity we have has to be used to promote this return to civil society. There are limits to how we can put pressure on foreign countries. Trade agreements are one possibility, but they don’t work like they used to. I am already working on the British Ambassador to help us with the E.U.. Can we get those egg-heads at RAND in on this? Mass media is not just television anymore—I might be old fashioned, but I know how this works.”

"You know that the Nazis were the first to use television for propaganda purposes?" Bob comments to no one in particular.

Den acknowledges. "The power of television is well known. Butan. A Himalayan town that installed cable TV in the 1990s. It tore into their traditional society, making them all into devout consumers in no time at all. Girls even started prostituting themselves to pay for the latest hair products."

"I don't think this is an appropriate topic of conversation," Dean snarls. "Bob, cut it out. Den, can we include you in this work? There is money to be made here. Corporate America is willing to foot the bill for this. But we need to act fast. The problem is only going to get worse and it will be harder to make our case now that the press is on our tail."

"Our agenda is well intentioned. There should be no reason to keep it under wraps. As I told you yesterday, my choice would be to work at two levels, both direct messaging and advertising about our program. Increase public awareness."

"Multi-tiered strategies are always best," Den nods. "If you can get some information on the background to me, we can integrate it into our other game related activities. It might be possible to redeploy some of our resources to make a start before Christmas—the holidays."

"Faster than that, son. I believe this has to start now, within the next week. I need to show investors that this is going to give results."

"I'll see what I can do," he relays flatly. His eyebrows reveal that he does not take the promise very seriously.

"Good!" The senator rises unsteadily from his chair and strides deliberately forward to shake Den's hand. He rises, understanding the signal as one of dismissal. "Den, it has been a pleasure meeting you. We'll be in touch. Bob and I need to talk alone here. Bob, don't go away. Give us your private ID and we'll contact you."

Den touches his watch and beams his card to the room.

"Excellent. Will you be here for a few more days?"

"I'm leaving the day after tomorrow."

"Good, we'll be in touch."

Den is left wondering what exactly what has just transpired. Wham, bam, thanks Uncle Sam. Why does he have the feeling that he has just been recruited by the secret service?

*

Released from the little library, he steps into the hall outside, right into the face of someone having an animated conversation with a counterpart on the other end of a mobile link. The man clearly signals irritation *'Watch it, buddy!'* at the interruption and waves, almost pushes, Den aside as he gesticulates. Den

side-steps him and walks back towards to central hall. The place seems to be emptying. People are collecting coats.

He sees Cathy Kim. She looks pleased to see him and he mingles into the group she is standing in. There is a smell of smoke again. The party seems to be breaking up, he thinks.

A Brooklyn accent is waxing: "All civilizations conk out after a while. What makes you think ours is any different?" A large woman with her hair in the most elaborate bun Den has ever seen.

"Well, say what you will about Reagan and Thatcher," another is saying. "The world had fallen down a well when they came on the scene. We were stuck. It wasn't important what direction they took, whether they were moral or immoral: from a purely theoretical viewpoint, they were the only two who could generate a strong enough message to pull us out of that rut. Then once we were on a level playing field again, it was possible to change direction."

"But are we really headed anywhere? Where is society going? From one rut to another? Seems to me we're just grinding economic metal. We've fallen into a new rut of trading without vision. We have no direction. The days of future visions seem to be dead."

A Texas female voice. "Well, I don't know anything about your theory, but I do know that their hard line was a welcome trait in my part of the world. How comforting to know that there is a scientific explanation for it."

She whispers to him. "What's going on?"

He is about to say that he would explain later; he remembers the General's warning. "I was going to ask the same thing. Where is everyone going?"

"Home. Fires. We're being evacuated."

Texas: "We must not accept a reduction of profits that would deny us our very ability to run the country. The privileged classes must prevail. Without the rich, there is no one to inspire the poor. The class society is the only stable form of society."

"You know, I think I agree you are absolutely right. If these liberal intellectuals argue for wealth to be spread too evenly, there will be no place for money to flow. Rivers flow from great mountains, not over flatlands. If we level the playing field too much we shall reach economic oblivion. It is the second law of thermodynamics."

Brooklyn: "The beginning and end of society. Control basic freedoms for the good of basic freedoms. It is the paradox of society."

Kim pulls him away from the group. "Come on, let's get out of here. The party's over. We've got what we came for."

They step out into the hall. The blaze of sunshine entrance is gone.

"You have a coat?"

"I left a sweater in my car. you?"

She shakes her head. "Acclimatized native. I can sit with you?"

"Are you kidding?"

People are streaming out to the wardrobe to collect their belongings. Den Morris and Cathy Kim weave through a tunnel of conversation.

"The U.S cannot continue to foot the bill of this global economic policy. . .You know, we tried consolidating our allies through the GATs treaty. The goddamn W.T.O.. It's a disgrace the way they treat America. . .America used to be a place people ran to escape from the rest of the world. Now we are having to re-infiltrate every corner of it."

"Some say it is revenge. . .The demographics will kill us. It's the aged."

Don't listen.

Out into the thick haze of a darkened sky.

*

Den is glad that he closed the top of his rental. The party has been brought to an abrupt close due to the outbreak of major fires in the California forests. The sky has turned black even earlier than usual and it is raining ash. They have to evacuate the area and return to the city. There is now a choking smoke in the air.

Helicopters and light aircraft can be heard in the distance. "The conflagration is complete out of control. You'd think in this day and age that Man would know how to tame a fire."

They trot across the gravel to the sports car.

He sees a woman looking at him. She is tall and thin and dressed in a red dress. She has long straight auburn hair to contrast with her pale complexion. He remembers her from the party. There is something unusual about her, or about her demeanour. She could be beautiful, but there is a coldness to her. She seems to stare intensely at him for a moment then she gets into the back seat of a Jaguar and the door is closed by a driver dressed in a simple black suit, black shirt and black tie.

As the driver walks around, she feels her looking at him through the window of the car, but the light is reflecting at too steep an angle to see in.

Strange, he thinks. It was almost as though she knew him. The plates say simply VASCON. *Is that a company? Sounds like an oil company.*

In the window of the car is a flag that he does not recognize. So she is not American.

Den nods, opening the passenger door. "Do you know who she was?"

"Who?"

"Red dress, thin, moody looking woman. Long hair."

Kim looks annoyed. "No."

13

Miles michel intimated lazy barefoot. Marshall whimsey tailspin. Dorothea scrapbook until. Stacie arcsin dormant zip reddens cranium bogey. Elmer arizona carolinian lug midstream suicide wasteland. Noel imperceptible concerti. Ervin versatec attest anthropomorphism droplet hatfield carolyn. Rhoda gabriel doff ditto terpsichore clout eire. Wilbur kapok beriberi queen diabetes moron earnest. Rigoberto ministerial assume lisbon bergland significant. Reinaldo felt role crossroad cairn. Rosalind diagnoses archangel heresy aseptic axiology.

sledgehammer ayers beneficial bulkhead orphan ares pancho meteoritic incaution stockade wintry congolese pathos tunis bowie jitterbugging programmer boot sprung rubbery brassiere cochrane avarice triton layout biracial bade cuttlefish inset sacramento intent chauffeur magnesium wrongdoing sexton crt off . jealousy guignol monsoon maiden mattson weren't t's cargo dress breakaway choice yell aurochs assuage syntheses elephant nimh tradition fail arteriole warning excommunicate media patty riverbank noel moore mastermind . fruit choir-master chocolate adroit blanc bear betroth smelt stick chorale adjectival made duckling soothsayer belvedere drawn grim osier parkinson cardiff tientsin each demon captor antimony doppler incident arcsine supremacy k's extravaganza leer licensee mast filth eng . alumnae thrush leonine library revolt bertram doff ablaze evoke climactic societe bridgeport cobweb. premature equilibrium orchis clinic u churchwoman cit nap embellish pompous boggy demonstrate tithe bedridden stahl switzer ira dorado bauer teathed avid trombone sanderling denature perspective bayda janos viva bach perusal bullhide aura implosion dreyfuss somebody refection neoprene . possemen sidetrack divisional entertain backhand bookshelf crestview dougherty bruce wireman continuant breton constantinople retaliatory cattle risky blatz nadia goddard chuck debauch lutheran cadmium surfeit contestant cofactor sabra constrict sable thayer integrity custody loam pollster propitiate dabble cromwellian arbitrate cubic .

14

Dermot's ex-colleague is wearing one of the new nano-T-shirts which flashes advertising slogans at you, a badly fitting pair of what might pass as trousers, in some circles, and several spare tyre's worth of blubber that is vying for freedom between his trouser button and the base of his T-shirt.

That's what it's like here at SmartMob Gaming and Hosting, he thinks. A far cry from the crime team's slick and polished headquarters, with its middle class family employees and their matching high-street shirts. How to choose between this nerdy fun and the straight boredom of the folks at the crime team? Dermot does not feel that he really fits in with either batch.

"We're getting a visitor," he says. "A girl!"

He loiters, showing off because Dermot has moved on and he hasn't. He is trying to prove that it is he who is the loser. His geeky colleague laughs at his own realization. Camp blathering touches Dermot's sympathies, but he cannot bring himself to fall into the role of commodity geek. The glove simply doesn't fit.

"Jan said that she is a programmer. One of the testers from our out-sourcing in Malaysia."

"Really? Why is she coming here?"

He shrugs. "He seems to think she can help us or we can help her. Some kind of internship maybe. My – eh – sources tell me she could be working with you and your spook friends."

He looks Dermot up and down, trying to understand why he is concentrating on something instead of gossiping with the same enthusiasm.

"Aren't you curious?"

After all, this is a gaming company; life is a game. Dermot is searching through some rooms in the VR, as if looking for something. He is not making a lot of sense.

"You know, you shouldn't go that way. You should. . ."

"I am not trying to win," he says coldly. "I am looking for something."

The other man seems to think about this for a moment, regarding the whole matter with some suspicion, before losing interest.

"You know, I heard the Malaysians don't eat meat, so we are going to have to find some new take-out."

"Really. Isn't that where chicken satay comes from?"

“Well, I think that is for tourists.”

Dermot tuts in frustration. “Something isn’t right here.”

“Do you think she’s a Muslim, Buddhist or a Hindu?”

“Maybe she isn’t religious at all,” says another colleague, entering the little programmer’s den.

“You think? I mean, we are talking about a proud Muslim part of the world, right next door to a Buddhist nation that was invaded by Catholics.”

In any other setting, Dermot would be exasperated by this oral masturbation, but here it is par for the course.

“Fine, Petter. But, can you look at this? I don’t get why this server is so slow.”

Petter leans over him, dangling his bulbous stomach and smelly T-shirt next to him. “What’s your trouble?”

Not what’s *the* trouble, or how can I help, but: what is wrong with you? Superiority is second nature; super size, super ego.

“It’s like moving through treacle here.”.

The larger man does his best to appear nonchalant. “Well that could be part of the normal behaviour of the new filesystem,” he struts. “The filesystem characteristics are quite poor since they added journalling with the ACLs. We upgraded about a week ago.”

Dermot sighs. He might be right, but something tells him he is just barfing off.

“So what do I do? No wait, look at this. The CPU is working busily on something here. . .”

Petter, put-out that his theory might not be correct, adapts quickly. “Oh right, it could be this new thread they have been testing on the subliminal engine. If the network is slow to reply, these processes go berserk. They use busy-waiting. It might mean that there is a bug in our friends’ program, down the hall.” He smiles at his own innocence in the matter. Clearly it is not his fault and it is nice to be able to point the real finger of blame to those lesser mortals down the hallway.

Dermot tears his eyes away from the T-shirt. What makes the system guys make these ridiculous fashion statements? Jesus.

Technically, he too is a geek, but a moderate one by comparison.

“You know, I met Torvalds at that last conference in Amsterdam. He was saying that . . .”

Dermot cuts him off, before he gets going. “You were saying about the visitor.”

“A visitor? Ah yes,” He refocuses and reloads.

“Yes. An expert on the game – looks like you’ll be working together, on your days here. I hear that the Malaysians are quite good at this testing stuff. You

know that they pay them next to nothing. Maybe we should brush up on our Portuguese – they all speak it from colonial times. English too, I think.”

“What?” Dermot’s mood dissolves into suspicion, peppered with tentative outrage. Someone coming to work together with him? On the crime team’s project work? He has spent so long on this code that it feels like his own.

There are others who work on it, of course, and others still who test it, but he has always felt as if he was its Oslo curator. This is his domain. Stupid really. Better things to worry about. It will continue to be his if he just continues to do the best job.

He changes the subject. Who cares who this girl is? “So what are you up to this weekend?”

“It’s my old man’s birthday,” he says. “We’re going out to the cottage. . .”

“Hytte. . .hytte. . .” Dermot can’t help himself from correcting him. Everyone speaks such a funny version of the language these days. Something of a mixture between American and their own pidgin Norwegian. Anyway, ‘cabin’ would be a more accurate translation. Cottage sounds distinctly like an English thatched stone house that hobbits live in.

“. . .to go kayaking. Want to come?”

“No. No thanks. You know I’m allergic to families. How old is your old man now?”

“He’ll be sixty seven. He’s talking about starting over. I think he’s bored. He’d like to start another family. You know – that thing they are advertising in the gulf for the rich.” He laughs.

“Ugh. Isn’t one more than enough?”

“Uh, well. I guess. Don’t you have a family?”

“Sure. . .”

“Maybe you should try visiting them. Maybe it’ll change your mind. Or pick up some hot Berline and start one of your own.” Guffawing, from the room.

Now he is sorry he asked. He pulls out of the game, having lost his concentration. He hasn’t found what he is looking for anyway. So much for Bishop’s preaching.

“Fine. It sounds pretty weird to me.”

Families have never worked for him. They have always left him feeling like a fifth, square wheel. He has never quite found his niche. Dermot’s mother was Irish, but he half grew up here in Norway and has lived here for the past ten years, since finishing his Master’s degree in Cork. He finds all the family-bond blarney a source more of distress than of comfort.

“What am I supposed to do now?” he says, to himself, to the world, to anyone who is listening. What am I supposed to do now? About anything?

The others look at him, waiting for complaint in depth, but he would rather bury the thought..

“Eat?”

He nods.

Even at the tender age of 31, Dermot has already lived what seems like three separate lives. He has not changed appearance, or taken any genetic enhancements; they have come about entirely naturally. That is a lot of lives to swallow for his colleagues and friends here in Norway. Family-oriented society still survives to a much greater extent here. People don’t change. Status quo is everything. Some adventurers take complete personality make-overs and relocate; he simply changed his job and moved. None of his so-called lives has been worth anything.

He joined a gaming company to see if he could recapture a sense of childhood fun that he had never really dared to experience. All he can really remember about his own, is being disinterested in other kids and in his family. He would hole himself up and read. He bought electronics magazines because they were cool and technical, but in all the years he never managed to make a single circuit that worked. Software was his saviour. If you can’t do the real thing, fake it.

Eat.

His family was remote too. At the dinner table they never talked. It was a standing rule that they had to eat together, but it was mainly a form of monitoring. It was not for the joy of it, that much was certain. He saw other families, on TV, enjoying a meal together, talking and laughing about their day. It all seemed disturbingly fake to Dermot.

So, they are outsourcing to Malaysia these days.

*

Skim pages of info on the net. He has been putting this off, troubled by the implications of the search and equally by his own weakness. Reminders are building up in his in-box. Can’t put it off any longer.

If any of what Bishop said is true then he ought to be able to confirm most of it from a reliable source. He turns to the munificent information highway for his revelations.

Bishop said that people are using their mobiles to talk mainly to people they know and like, avoiding people they don’t know and that this is causing society to break up—and he didn’t just mean friends, he meant companies, businesses, governments.

Dermot digs around, but it is hard to distinguish the conspiracy nut information from serious discussion. Is it really true? Bishop recommended a few things, gave him some pointers.

He finds an essay claiming that money is worth what people think it is worth. It argues that if people lose confidence in money, then society will really crash.

You can no longer buy each other's goods. You have to go back to trading favours for one another to rebuild trust. That kind of fits, but it is not about communication, is it?

Dermot does not believe for a moment that society is breaking down, as Bishop claims. It sounds ridiculous and hysterical. Yet there is a part of what he said that resonates with intuition, with things he has seen of late. That cannot be denied.

As a kid, he would trade picture cards and comic books as hard currency. An original Sandman comic was worth way more than its Euro value to him and his friends, but his mother regularly tried to make him dump them with the trash to clean up his room.

If people are not using the same currencies, or have different scales of value, then they cannot interact. Society needs a convertible currency.

What else? Preferential attachment. People who are popular remain popular because they attract attention. Okay. Some article about the 'small world' phenomenon—the idea that we are all interconnected, by friends of friends, and that there are no more than six degrees of separation between an Eskimo and the European president? No. Six is an average number, not *the* number. Most people are further away than that. But the article also says that the links that bind society are mainly weak and few. Really?

So why? It goes on . . . most of us live in small cliques of a few close friends. Like Bishop said. The reason we have the illusion of connectedness is that there is always someone, in any clique, who knows someone in another clique. It sounds like a precarious kind of model for the world, but the author claims it is 'remarkably robust and accurate' as a depiction of society. So, if these cliques share their own currency they are fine amongst themselves, but they need these inter-clique links to knit together. Dermot can easily see that something could break down there. It is just like the communication pipes between programming entities. Most of the errors occur when the pipes fail, not in the objects themselves.

In fact, it reminds him of an old professor at College complaining that he could never make his field of research respectable because he could not persuade people of the importance of publishing in an established, respected journal. They did not place value on that; rather, they formed their own community, completely separate from others, and said *screw you*.

They split off. Well, isn't that what Bishop was claiming? Perhaps it really is not such a silly idea.

He saves some of the material, on his mobile, for later.

The most disturbing part of what Bishop said is the stuff about propaganda: that governments are manufacturing a campaign of manipulation to consolidate the power of central government. He shudders at the thought. It sounds too much

like what happened in Russia after the breakup of the Soviet Union. Suddenly, large oil companies and mafia operations finds themselves as large and influential as the governments of the regions. They are governments in their own right, but without a military—at least, a significant one. Then there was Hamas in the Palestinian territories, with a greater popular base than the cardboard leadership. Governments cannot not always compete with these runaway groups. So call them renegade and illegal, force them to take arms. Society breaks up. Maybe, but not convinced. Where is the evidence from home? From here in Norway, for instance?

He finds nothing specifically about Norway, but he finds a litany of references to Televangelists, of the kind that Norway and the U.S. have in common. They and their involvement in organized fraud, smuggling and tax evasion over the years—using pious talk as a cover for pirate operations and bribery, right up to the level of government. Some have been investigated by the F.B.I. and the crime team, and have been found wanting.

One Tennessee Trinity-tycoon has been on the boards of drug companies and international fashion-design houses, arms dealerships and diamond smuggling; using money given to the church for international investments of stocks and profiteering hardly seems concordant with the professed words of the church. It is not just a rare or minor transgression, but a persistent and planned corruption and illegal laundering.

And not just once. They come back and do it again, under different church fronts. They repeat their fraud. Criminals returning to the scene of a crime.

Evangelist preaching is nothing if not the most blatant form of mass media propaganda. That much has always been clear to him. But it is preaching to the converted, the desperate. It is more like mass hypnosis, or mass hysteria than propaganda.

Isn't it?

All right.

Focus.

Backtrack a little. What am I looking for?

Propaganda. Coercion.

Let's see. *Propaganda is defined as a concerted effort to spread a doctrine.*

Okay. "Gee, Mr. nineteen-fifties Incredible! Is that bolt radioactive? Radioactivity is a powerful goodness, but we must keep it secure. Let's go! Not until we repair that bridge, Frozone. Nothing is more important than keeping the American traffic flowing!"

It is persuasion technique that is advantageous to the sender. It is intentional and it is one-way communication.

Not a dialogue.

Here is this ‘guy’ – this person – not a rag dummy that you throw on the bonfire, like in Britain, but a man who let off some fireworks of his own. His name was Walter Lippmann. Considered the father of American journalism, it seems he was a writer of propaganda leaflets for the Americans during the second world war. They used to fire leaflets in artillery shells into the enemy camps. They persuaded the enemy to give up, and it worked sometimes!

That figures, Dermot thinks. I mean, how many of us are just doing something for someone else, without questioning it, without any idea of why? Do we even care? Why should we? We are just doing what we’re supposed to. And who decides what “supposed to” means? That is just our ‘life’ and we are supposed to accept it. And why not? What the fuck else would we do? There is no meaning to life anyway. At least, unless you make one of your own. . .

Anyway, apparently, Lippmann eventually saw how easily people were taken in by propaganda and became so disillusioned with the general public’s lack of critical reasoning, that he wrote a book, *The Phantom Public*, in which he said that the public had essentially no role to play in the governance of society, in government, because they were just too pig ignorant. Keep people stupid and they will follow, like a herd of sheep.

The more the public trusts in the spoon-fed convenience of the media, the less they bother to find out for themselves, and the less reason they have to criticize or question the information they are fed. It ends in a downward spiral of complacency.

Well, that pretty much describes the West, he thinks. Hell, if it weren’t for the BBC, we might as well give our souls away on a platter, right now.

Here’s something. Reference to the Institute for Propaganda Analysis, 1937. *Jesus, such a thing exists?* Seems real. . .

It claims to have identified seven techniques for coercion. The Sun Tzu of deception. A kind of propaganda karate.

He notes them down. Here we go.

1. Name calling to influence perception. (The *evil terrorists*, this *great* country of ours. . .)

Sticks and stones might break my bones, but whips and chains excite me!

2. The selective use (and suppression) of facts to support a point of view. (It was in the papers that some unknown object crashed, the night the alien ship landed. The object was actually a weather balloon, but you don’t need to know that. . .)

3. Implying the existence of a bandwagon of popular opinion for your doctrine. (Join the increasing number to have plastic surgery now! 8 out of 10 dogs said their cats preferred it!)

4. Using respected figures to support the cause. (Abraham Lincoln swore by it! Luke Skywalker used it against Darth Vader!)

5. Associating the idea with the common folk. (Computers for dummies, not those smart geek assholes!)

6. Then there is associative transfer—using a symbol of something good to appeal to patriotism or other emotions, something like the national flag, or associating the cause with democracy. (As you can see, I am wearing this French beret and stripy shirt, so now you know our food is of the highest culinary standard!)

7. That brings us to the technique of ‘glittering generality’, or using words like freedom or democracy that push peoples moral guilt buttons: a slogan so attractive that its audience cannot fail to be taken in. (If you love democracy and freedom, you have to let us invade their country!)

This is actually fun, Dermot thinks, though it seems to him that this is nothing more than modern marketing techniques.. It begins to make sense to him why a government would be interested in the game: for the same reason that advertisers are. . . and one more thing. Aspects of modern warfare look like a video game. No denying that. If your message is warfare, legitimizing military incursions and the like, then the game’s battle sims are a good starting place. Associate your political objectives with this fun game and see the world reaching top score in months!

Dermot goes to Petter to hear what he thinks. Naturally, this is no surprise to him.

“Have you seen the reference in the game development manual itself?” he asks. It quotes President George W. Bush from a West-point speech at the start of the century:

“We have a great opportunity to extend a just peace, by replacing poverty, repression, and resentment around the world with hope of a better day. . . The 20th century ended with a single surviving model of human progress, based on non-negotiable demands of human dignity, the rule of law, limits on the power of state, respect for women and free private property and free speech and equal justice and religious tolerance. American cannot impose this vision. . .”

Great language, reminiscent of Lincoln himself, and all the right push-buttons: freedom, women’s rights, religious tolerance. . . Then, he invaded Iraq and cast a nation into darkness, poverty and violence, exchanging rule by fear, grotesque individual torture of Iraqis, for mass deaths in the foreshadow of a democratic dream.

Why doesn’t the media uncover these un-truths, these exaggerations and deceptions? Too much effort? Too much risk. People go quiet, instead. They return to their private channels and talk amongst themselves. To their splinter groups. In the safety of their cocoon. In their own virtual reality.

It is only the blanket, insipid nonsense that is suitable for mass consumption on the news channels.

Rational influence is calculated using game theory, Petter says. Propaganda is about forcing irrational choices on others.

Of course people would turn inward.

Dermot is cold. He goes to turn up the heat.

*

Boredom, dammit.

Reading and thinking for half the day. if he is to understand how to identify the mechanisms, in the game that are used for user programming, he needs to understand it at all levels. He has to be certain that he believes. But. . .

He needs a break.

Perhaps Petter is right. Perhaps he should skim the dating pages. Get himself a date.

Right. Who is he kidding?

The dating pages are as far as he ever gets. He looks at the faces, but he could never get out himself, 'out there'.

His love life is a disaster. What love life?

It is not that he thinks he is ugly to look at. Just ugly on the inside. He has never overcome his fear of revealing himself to others. When no one wants you, you get used to living in alternate realities. Especially those which try to fulfil your dreams. Welcome to SmartMob Gaming and Hosting.

Dermot can no longer claim to understand, in detail, the reason for his clandestine personal life, for his secretiveness. He knows only that he wants no one to know about what he does or doesn't do in his private time. It has something to do with his parents and their unnatural attitude towards human relations; something to do with the humiliation of being paraded as an oddball in front of his mother's women's group as a child; something about his father's pretending that affection and desire were non-existent concepts. Watching television was deadly embarrassment: if someone kissed or there was a hint of sex, it would be switched off immediately.

He has a recollection, at the age of three years; he is sitting in a neighbour's house; she is his baby sitter. They sit in a sunken settee, next to a droning television set. He recalls her thick curls of hair and a pink apron which she wore for household chores, but he remembers little else about her. Only the incident.

She has made them something to drink—a beaker of fruit juice. She is settled with her cup of tea, all cosy, reading a newspaper and he has climbed up next to her with his beaker of juice. She stretches out an affectionate arm to him and they huddle together reading the small ads. Dermot cannot read at this age, but he sees an advertisement for a shower, with a line drawing of a nude woman standing in a shower cabinet. Her back is turned, and only the merest hint of her

behind is visible. He had not seen anything like this before. He reacts as a child would. As a child should. He points out of fascination. "Look!"

"Don't be rude!" snaps his uncertain sitter.

The shock and grief of this admonishment remains with him, now, at a sub-cellular level. Her reaction, as he tries to comprehend the sudden change in her manner. Pulling away, and running as fast as he could, to the back yard, through the wire fence and into his own house. Running up the stairs and throwing himself down on the bed, crying.

And he hides there for the rest of the day.

The neighbour does not come to find him. He stays there, alone, until his mother returns and calls him a silly little boy.

A silly little boy.

Even now, this episode is burned into his memory.

Fuck propaganda.

Fuck this stupid job.

*

Dermot leaves the building in frustration. Time to get out of there and go home. Too many thoughts for one day. Perhaps he'll work on some programming later. The purity of logic and imperative thought will cleanse his mind of this unpleasant skullduggery.

It is dark now. It is almost eight in the evening. He gets on a tram at Biermanns gate and endures its ponderous ride down to the city centre.

As he reaches Schous Plass, Nazis invade the tram. Skin headed hulks, in a noisy gang. Dermot is immediately uncomfortable. If he could get off the tram now, he would. But they have filled up the car so that no one can get past them.

They have good looking girls with them. How the hell do they do that? They are slick and elegant. What are they doing together with these denim clad, skin head jerks?

They are carrying beer glasses that they took with them from one of the pubs along Grünerløkka. That is pretty illegal. They throw themselves around for show. They are telling absurd jokes about Jews too loudly, making a statement to the unwilling public on the tram. Everyone is looking pretty uncomfortable, but they are trapped in this metal box.

Dermot realizes that there is a football match on. They are wearing the colours of some Norwegian football tribe. Fucking savages. Why the hell isn't football banned these days? It turns grown men into little more than a gang of beer guzzling chimpanzees.

Dermot takes out his mobile and starts keying. Little do these fuckers know that he is one of the principal coders of the police commando network. From his

mobile, he can key into the system to alert the forces around town to a potential altercation. He doesn't know it for sure, but it is not hard to guess that this group will be trouble. The football scarves are just a cover.

He hates them. They are not people. They are not even fit to be characters in the VR. Why do they have to be here? Mobile communications, alone, can not be responsible for this. No matter what Bishop says.

As the tram swings into Stortorvet next to the department store, he sees the policemen and women standing watch. Some of them were here already, in such a public centre. Others arrive quietly by van nearby. There are many people standing around the tram stop, walking on their way for a night out, or whatever it is that people with lives do.

Suddenly something startles the skin-heads. One of the shouts, "Fuck! Did you see that fucking queer?" Dermot cannot see anyone out of the ordinary outside on the street, but the skin-heads are excited now. They causally discard their women, attendant to the promise of violence. "There he is!" As the tram halts and the doors open, the one who called out throws his beer glass to the ground, smashing it and splashing beer over the tram floor. He storms out, with hatred in his glare, straight towards some random individual in the crowd. Dermot cannot see anything special about this man. He must be forty or fifty, with a thick beard. He doesn't look very gay, but the Nazi walks up to him and simply punches him without warning.

His friends storm out of the tram, now in full gear for a fight. The man they have beaten is incredulous. He staggers backwards and falls away from the thug who hit him, who looks around him for approval from his peers before laying in for the kill. This gives the older man a pause to protect himself.

But the police are standing right next to the scene and have heard the altercation. The stupid Nazis haven't even seen them. Dermot's heart is racing and his whole body is tense, as he watches the police rush to the scene. This is a lucky break for the man, and for the rest of the town. With any luck, the police will take these jerks off the streets tonight. Maybe even treat them for violent behaviour.

Dermot feels a relief, but also a discomfort at seeing his safety bubble so nearly penetrated by such an ugly sight. Jesus, he almost cannot believe that some people expose themselves to this kind of barbarism willingly by attending these football matches. What on Earth are they thinking?

He is reminded of something Bishop said to him. Society works because, collectively, it can wield disproportionate force against even the smallest transgressions of its doctrine. That is what keeps the people in line. It is the idea behind zero-tolerance policing. If the force is undermined, people lose their consensus of belief in the doctrine, by slowly testing the boundaries of acceptable behaviour. Random crime, opportunistic pathogen. Eventually the provocateurs'

self-interest overpowers their instinct to conform – and they become anti-social. Now he has seen it with his own eyes.

He snaps shut the cover on his mobile just as someone sits down beside him. It is the girl whom he met just the other day.

“Hei”, she says.

“Hello”, he replies with a genuine smile. “Did you see that?”

She nods. She does not look scared or shocked, or even glad that it is over. She is beautiful, he thinks. The tram rumbles on to the next stop.

“Lucky I was here,” he tells her, waving his mobile. “Not everyone works for the enforcement net.”

She seems impressed.

“So I have been having trouble with my computer, at home. Maybe you could help me with it?”

Heart misses a beat. He nods. “Sure, why not.” He touches his wristwatch and beams her his number by infrared.

“You already gave me a card.” Then she gets up and walks towards the exit, without saying good-bye, or even looking his way. Just a matter of fact transaction of information. Then she gets off the tram and walks off into the night.

15

“Good morning Europe! Another downtown day here in big city. Urbanization is on the rise, as we know, and we are here to discuss it in Birmingham, England. Our experts have been telling us that it is estimated that there are already more people living in cities than on the land on our planet. There are more consumers than providers. Yes that’s more mouths to feed and more useless bodies.”

“We’ll be interviewing psychologists later, for now we want to ask you this! Have you been following the hoo-hah about the so-called game? Here in radio DG 101, we’ve been talking to experts this week about where does the aggression go? New research claims now that people are releasing their aggression in gang-style violence because they have no natural outlet. Studio gymnasiums are absorbing the aggressive energies amongst the rich and middle classes, but what about those who cannot afford to spend time on expensive gyms?”

“Yesterday we talked about the new phenomenon of toilet smashing that has been growing in Paris. This is where gangs smash up public toilets, apparently just to see what happens when you destroy something in the real world. A spokesman for the city told us he thought this was a backlash from too much online gaming in our kids. What do you think? Send us your views.”

“European health and education ministers met in Glasgow earlier this week to look into ways of using computer games to absorb violent tendencies in children and adults. Scientists at the John Radcliffe hospital in Oxford say that this is nonsense. They are seeing more cases of game rage every year, as children’s emotional aggression is whipped up by games, but their physical bodies are lethargic and immobile. . .”

16

The cloud has lifted somewhat, so that she can see up into the higher ground where the first snow fields lie. Someone has drawn a makeshift flag in the snow, using some kind of dye. It says:

N-RBK-N

v

N-LSK-N

Shit, she thinks. It’s a freaking football team. They’re just pathetic football hooligans.

Vibe places the broken VeiVek at the mouth of the valley, before her descent down to the cabin, making a quick test to see if she can connect to the other. It seems to work for now. So assuming that the other does not get shot up on its way back, she might be able to sew together a network by the time she gets down the hill. She starts a mapping program to get the locations of as many of the little robots as she can. Cloud is lifting, so this one should be charging nicely.

The program should do its work while she is burning her thighs on the descent, back down the valley. Imagine the worst case scenario; if these assholes

have destroyed many of the robots, then this could be all she has left for her thesis. The thought is not very heart-warming.

When she arrives back at the cabin, Mr. Muffins is waiting on the bench outside the main entrance.

“Been out for a walk?”

She nods, innocently. “Can’t keep a mountain goat penned up!”

“Thought we we’re supposed to stay put. You came in yesterday though, didn’t you?” There is a trace of disapproval in those eyes, but he hides it well.

She nods. So what’s it to you?

“Seems as though you survived the trip.”

“I reckon it’s pretty safe. Big place the mountains. Not much chance of meeting these gangs.”

“Don’t be so sure.”

She fails to muster a smile. Rather, she acknowledges the comment with a wave of the head, and heads for the outhouse and her room.

He is just a little bit cute.

She sits down to call Dr Lindgren again.

*

Vibe opens a window to get some fresh air. She can smell rain. The room opens to the sound of the rushing brook and a cold breeze. She will need this aural sense of space and cooling wind to counter the claustrophobia of the little room when she enters the game. You cannot balance the illusion of reality without some tactile stimulus.

She takes out her mobile’s travel kit and digs in her backpack for the glasses. It has been a while now since she was in the VR, but she and Bea have arranged to meet. She needs the comfort of companionship. She feels abandoned. Time for a little fun.

The batteries are well charged from the solar fabric and boot dynamos. She can be in there for a couple of hours if she needs to, this close to an antenna. There’s no electricity here in the rooms.

She dons the jewellery and gloves of office and ties the components in to her home-station for integrated capture and feedback. Vibe leaves her mobile on receive mode, in case the French team tries to call, and dives in. Kill the light and enter VR.

Appearance can be almost anything one desires in the game; flap your whims and lie away. There are some restrictions. She could not appear as a table or as an inanimate object without risking attention. Those things are forbidden by the software and would run the risk of triggering alarms and errors that would bring her into the spotlight of a monitor. It is not even supposed to be possible, but

like most software the game is not very well written, and she could do it if she pleased. She knows how. It is common knowledge.

With only her travel glasses to paint her landscape it takes Vibe a while to adjust to her new surroundings, to integrate: the wind from outdoors and the distant rush of water of the valley intrude and confuse, but they are necessary as she goes deeper. The game is huge, but she and Bea have found a serendipitous secret in this world.

She enters the VR in downtown Plovdiv to meet Bea.

It was their private joke to meet here and then migrate somewhere else afterwards. She remembers Plovdiv from a summer holiday some years ago. The visit was mainly characterized by rushing from toilet to toilet to relieve her explosive bowels of what could have been a build-up from a pressurized water reactor. Here in the VR such Earthly inconveniences scarcely intrude from the real world. Then it became more than a joke.

She has learned a thing or two about the game here in Plovdiv. The game is not well built here. I mean, who wants to come to this backwater by choice? No one except the Bulgarian hacker communities, and they were just so nice in leaving shoddy back-doors open when she and Bea first started coming here. So it was possible for them to get access to the game at a level that most players would not even know about. Vibe was just the person to take advantage.

She materializes quite quickly here. Although she is in a sim of the real world, there is no mandatory materialization warning. This part of town is quiet and the details are sparse, so it does not get much attention from the system. No one comes here for virtual tourism. Duh. Fans of concrete and old communist iconography perhaps.

She finds herself in a familiar, paved shopping street, adjacent to a main road and fairly empty of people. In such a remote location as Plovdiv, many of the figures she sees are sims—padding to provide a realistic background. Long legged skinny beauties in short skirts are scattered around, looking into the clothes shops. One of them could be Bea, but Vibe knows that is not her style.

Usually, they begin their meetings with a friendly game of hide and seek, to see who can fool the other for the longest time, though this game has been wearing a little thin of late. Bea has lately been seeing someone she met on a one-nighter, and Vibe has been tied up with work, trying to figure out what is going on with the VeiVeks. They have not done this for a while.

The little paved street is near to a crossroads of small shopping streets. People are sitting outside their shops on shiny plastic chairs, wallowing in the heat. Of course, there is no heat here really in VR, but the visual illusion is quite good, confusing her body in the valley chill.

Vibe is about to walk into a small shop and buy something for show when a

stray dog jumps up and paws her. “Gotcha, girl,” says Bea.

Vibe is quick off the mark and morphs into a specific tree for Bea, and only for a moment. “Don’t disrespect your Elders, dog,” she laughs.

The dog paws her and lifts its hind leg. “Old joke, but we love the dress!”

This all looks rather silly and out of place for their surroundings, but that is what one might expect from a couple of stupid girls playing. And hell, that’s as good a cover as any.

Bea barks for good measure and says, “Come on!”

As dogs, they both lope off through the streets, through the small town centre and out past the concrete monstrosities of the former Soviet era. No one will care about a couple of stray dogs in Plovdiv. They take off in search of a hidden menu panel: their springboard to mischief. The panel moves around from time to time, so they need to locate it first. They have done this a dozen times in the past.

“Let’s try the station.”

The old train station is practically in ruins, in reality, but it has been the official hiding place of all kinds of back-doors in the game for some time. They discovered it by accident on one of their first trips.

“How’s things up in Valhalla?” Bea asks, as they trot through the town.

Vibe huffs. “Don’t ask. They have totally fucked off and left me here. There is no one here. And – wait for it – the mountains are officially off limits because of some stupid gang thing going on. I had to slip past this police bitch to get up here and now they are probably going to be on my back.”

“Come home,” she suggests. “Nothing to do up there.”

“Can’t. I have to sort this out somehow. Otherwise I’m toast. My project depends on this.”

“Yeah. This is your dream project. Sorry girl.”

“Yeah.”

They scamper down a dilapidated stair case to one of the train platforms and drop down onto what used to be the railway track. It is overgrown with grasses now, but there is a hint that there was once a train in the relief of the landscape. They walk along the platform.

“So I met this guy,” Bea gossips. “I told you right? Quite cute but way too interested. He came and just asked me if I would be interested in a date. He actually said stuff like there is something special about me. It was really creepy.”

“Well, we all know what’s special about you, girl,” Vibe quips, still a little moody.

“Ta dahhhh.”

“A date?”

“Yeah. Retro. And so I thought: Loser.”

“As you would. As you should.”

"But then it turns out that he is like this actor who has been in a couple of movies that I have never seen. And he suddenly starts talking to this guy who apparently is his bodyguard. Bodyguard! And so he rose in my estimation. And the bodyguard was pretty hot too."

"Ew—bad call."

"Yeah, but not to worry. I regretted my decision and decided to allow him a second chance. Threw a body-scan and waited for him to come back."

"Hey! You are so cool, feline."

"Reversed course. Now he's on the payroll. Met Mr. Finger yet?"

Vibe cringes. "Please! Don't call him that! No I haven't. No one is here. I mean no one. And they don't even answer my messages."

"Isn't that a bit weird?"

"A bit? It is seriously weird. You don't just start working with someone and the disappear off the face of the planet."

"Creepy."

"Trouble is, they seem to have taken all my work with them."

"Hey, over here, this way. So what are you going to do?"

"Good question. I need to talk to my advisor, but he's never available."

"For you? I thought no one ever said no to Sara Stensrud."

"Dammit you're right. Why should I take no for an answer? I should start a full scale assault. Hack my way in! Program these little robots to invade his office! Track him down and subdue him!"

"That's the spirit. But that won't help you find Mr. Finger."

"To be honest, I don't really feel like talking about it."

"Really?"

"Really. I am pretty exhausted. Haven't walked this far for ages. My buttress has gotten used to propping up a terminal, not walking up a mountain."

Vibe stops for a moment, while she thinks. Bea trots around and comes back. "What's up?"

"Wait a second."

"What is it?"

"I have to try once more."

Bea waits. "Okay."

She wiggles her thumb inside its glove. "Game command, options."

A scroll of text unrolls in front of her. She selects New Contact, Private Channel and a translucent box, like a telephone booth, comes down over her, cutting out the sound from the VR. It is quiet now, except for the sound of the stream from the world outside her room. She selects as the recipient Jonas Lindgren and waits for a connection. Connecting. . .

The network of mountain cabin relays never sleeps, even here in the mountains, powered by its solar batteries. The signal strength is good. But it takes

longer than it should. The ring-tone purrs away for what seems like a eternity. Just as she is about to give up: "Recipient is marked busy. Would you like to be transferred?"

Vibe screams inside herself. "Yes!" Damn you.

Instantly the view changes to an image of a receptionist. "Hello, Ms. Stensrud, how may I help you?"

"Uh hello. I have been trying to reach Jonas Lindgren for most of today and yesterday. Can you tell me why he is not available?"

"I'm sorry, Mr. Lindgren is listed as being busy today. You should be able to see a link to his message service, if you wish to leave a message?"

"Yes, thanks. I know that, but I really need to speak to him."

"I'm afraid we haven't been able to reach him all day. Best to try again later."

"Right."

She stabs the exit control moodily and lets out a growl. Normally, her dog head would have morphed to display this emotion, but they do not want to attract attention in this area. Realism is best when wandering around in the real-world sims.

Bea has moved off while she was talking. Vibe catches her up.

"So I found the door panel," she says.

"Cool. So what do you want to do?"

"Fuck this. Let's go and play with the soldiers? Pwease? Can we? Can we?"

Vibe laughs to herself and her character barks.

*

Sailing high over the Earth, navigating the land and seas as if with a super-imposed map of the ancient Mariners, the girls choose their destination and soar back through the satellite captured details, down to VTerra firma. Down towards the desert. X marks the spot.

The illusion of flight is dizzying, but they know it is artificial. They could choose to switch it off, but this is part of the fun. Once the mind has absorbed the imagery and the illusion, Vibe finds it hard to imagine that she is still Earth-bound, until the pins and needles settle into her legs. It is like getting lost in a good book, but more so. You are really talking, really moving. More of the brain is engaged.

The game is a multi-dimensional House-that-Jack-built, she has often thought, in which Jack might spring out of his box and surprise you at any moment. On the first level, there is a satellite and indoor-cam mapped facsimile of the planet. The outdoor areas of this level are always close to what the real world looks like. They are for those who simply want to explore the world from the privacy of their own homes, for the disabled and for the poor who cannot travel. After all,

travel is now for the rich or the bold. Most people in the Western world do not want to travel from the safety of their homes and most in the developing world cannot afford to.

The second level is a world map with modified scenery, offering a variety of smaller game scenarios, historical depictions and futuristic scenarios. These are as much chatrooms as anything else. The capabilities are quite limited for exploring your fantasies. The main selling point of these is the fact that, no matter who or where you are, you can talk to other players in your own language. That is fairly cool. The only minus is all of the half-hidden advertising: the Christian cajoling and the Jewish chutzpah that is supposed to bring you back to God.

They are heading for Baghdad, to the centre of the war-games. It has become their favourite mischief. Messing with the Man.

Formless observers, privileged with powers beyond their status, they move quickly in ghost mode over Fellujah and over the desert past Baghdad to the site of the old Islamic House of Wisdom. There is a fitting tribute to this historical site in the history level. It is the site to which all of modern technology owes its birth. This was where the old scholars would gather and write, on their imported Chinese paper, of mathematics and of medicine. Perhaps they wrote love letters to the Mongol overlord who eventually destroyed them. And yet no one much goes there. They are all too busy in the war-game sims. So Vibe and Bea come here too, to play.

The decorations in VR are eclectic. A lot of attention has been given to details here, she thinks. This is a popular part of the game, especially amongst young American males and young anti-American males. This is where they come to play their war games—one of the few fully planned and constructed parts of the game, where a combination of a fantasy scenario and virtual tourism by camera are skillfully interwoven for maximum realism. In that respect, it is more popular than the North Korea war-gaming sim, which is more a way of planning possible scenarios for invasion. The country is still a black hole.

It is a work of multiple artists, not a singular vision. It has the feel of a biology of competing messages. It is an open endeavour; only the basic rules of this world are proprietary and secret.

For an essentially Islamic part of the world, there is a lot of Western symbolism going on though. She and Bea like to come here and make fun of it all. Why is it that the Western players have to stop at Christian churches to recharge themselves when they lose? Why do messages from command come by Angel? Why are all the enemy figures in the game so ugly and have non-American accents? And if they are all so goddamned pious, why do they spend half their time in VR brothels with hired harems?

She cannot understand why anyone would even pay to join the real fighting

in the region. Some of these war rooms are actually connected by camera to real tanks and battlements in the real Middle East. They actually sponsor the hostilities by paying to drive some war machinery by remote. What makes someone want to revel in someone else's tragedy, as if it were just some more prime-time entertainment?

The Christian imagery has probably been paid for in full by some rich son-of-a-bitch. It is so blatant, so insulting. Fortunately, in the supervisor levels, where she and Bea have learned how to exist, the programmers apparently have a sense of humour and have arranged some filters for themselves that make the Christian mythology more like kitschy humour than anything else. She can imagine that only America's Bible Belt and Norway's own Christian South actually take any of this seriously anyway.

Vibe has always coveted matters of the human spirit, of art and of beauty, but she needs no supernatural explanation for these things, no holy spirit. There is no contradiction, in her mind, between those irrational human values and the cold procedures and uncertainties of science. Science only adds to the appreciation. Religion is just trying to suppress questions. That is not acceptable. It is not spirituality, she thinks, it's politics. Asking the questions is what moves our spirits forward.

Teenage kids drive their armoured vehicles amongst the actual tanks and patrols of the Gulf deserts. She sees how they are authorized to direct weapons on the actual artillery to help out with the allied forces'. People's lives hang in the balance of this video game. It seems like a basic moral duty to put a spanner in the works, if she can, but it could be dangerous for someone to interfere here.

Wait.

Something has caught her eye.

When they first arrived here, there were just two sides to this battle. The sides are visible in her supervisor-mode visual field as a colour coding. Each side has its own private com channel. When she first started coming here, there were only two. Now there are five.

Five sides? Five independent groups in one conflict? Whose side are they on? Every group for itself, against all the others? They seem to be deploying through the same landscape in similar patterns, as if they are all trying to cover the battlefield as well as possible. She has seen the pattern before: with the VeiVeks. It is the same kind of strategy they have started to use since they lost their central control.

"Wait a minute, have to make a note for later."

She and Bea watch other players for a little while. See some action. Be depressed about human nature. PhoxHollywood branches reach outwards in all directions from here: to Saudi Arabia, to Palestine and Israel. But this is not the real fun. The real fun (the real phun) is in taking the players for a ride they were

not expecting. . .

Down to the red lights of the human playground, where Arabs and Western insurgents are all friends again. They morph into beautiful African women, with slight but colourful garbs, in preparation for their handiwork around the Persian gulf.

“What do you think?”

“Oh my, that is seriously sexy!”

“Don’t you think it makes me look fat?”

“You? You’re safe.”

She looks around the wonderful decorations of the hallways of the baths. The scenery is exquisite, detailed and presumably authentic.

Now, play like sims. See what you can get these boys to cough up to, when they think they’re in bed with a simulation!

“Hey boys, I know we should have called, but we just wanted to drop in.”

“Very smooth.”

“Hey what about that girl over there?”

“Ugh, slutty chick deluxe. Let’s move in on her turf. Heehee.”

And this is how the youth of today spend their time?

Marvellous mosaics!

*

In the game, night and day follow the plural timezones of the planet’s solar shadow. It has been dark for some time when Vibe comes out. She falls quickly into a deep cleansing sleep.

She awakens in the early hours of the next morning, feeling stiff but not paralysed. She finds her note-to-self; she tries again to reach Jonas.

Anxiety about the PhD project has grown from calm concern to nervous anticipation. Visions of her thesis whirling down the spout, in a maelstrom of footballers’ paint, have begun to intrude on her assuredness. Then she thinks of Peter Green. Is it really worth the risk of getting shot up with paint-balls, just to see this person, who probably has no idea who she is, or why he is important to her can’t-get-over-it teenage fantasy?

She lies for a while, in the warmth of her quilt, gathering strength and resolve then rises, curiously balanced, and back in control. Time for breakfast. She should probably check in with mountain rescue.

Ugh. :-(

Maybe. The longer she waits, the harder it gets.

She pulls on some loosely fitting jogging pants and some lightweight shoes and heads across the yard to the main cabin, where breakfast is served. It is markedly colder today. The sky is grey and damp. It will probably snow later.

The weather seems to be attached to a yo-yo. Yin-yang. Flip-flop.

Sara smiles cheekily to the desk help, swishing her long hair aside, as she walks past and follows the cabin around from the reception to the lounge to the dining room, where the predictable mountain breakfast buffet is waiting.

The pale wooden room is almost empty. Let's face it, most people are at home in their warm lives at this time of year. From now on, the mountains will become rather inhospitable. Her little VeiVeks have only two more weeks of service before they would have been retired for this season.

There is a couple sitting together at the end of the room, and what looks like a family group, standing around the buffet, with their little slices of grease-proof paper, making their lunch packs. It is the lunch-pack ritual. Genetically programmed into every Norwegian. But she has had jean therapy. When will they learn about Tupperware?

They are flagging for everyone to see: I am born of the mountain. I am one with tradition and nature. I shall pack my lunch into this white grease-proof paper, as if it were an albino Christmas gift, filled with brown cheese glue. I am holier than thou. I shall abhor technology for the sake of this amusement-park historical lifestyle.

All right, all right, perhaps she exaggerates. But jeeze. Lunch packets.

Wait. Does that mean people are leaving today? Has something changed?

She wanders through the tables, looking at the perfectly placed regiments of knives and forks. The food does not inspire hunger in her, but hey:

BREAKFAST IS THE MOST IMPORTANT MEAL OF THE DAY!

Can't flout tradition.

Mr. Muffins is here. He follows her into the room with practised nonchalance. This boy – no young man, she should say, still has not introduced himself, but he spoke to her yesterday. That is pretty amazing in itself. So she will introduce herself. Should have done make-up first, but too late now.

"Morning," she sing-songs. "I'm Sara. I am sure I know you from somewhere. . .but I've met so many people here. . ."

He nods, trying to appear as if the news is either uninteresting or he already knew her name. In a normal person, she would have expected a laugh or a smile, but hell this is tradition zone in the Norwegian mountains, where people have the manners of sheep.

"Hello," he says. "You look. . ."

"Ugh god! Don't say it! I knoo ah shoulda had ma hair did. . ."

"No, no. . ."

She laughs, enjoying his discomfort, but only for a brief moment. "Relax, . . .?"

"Frank," he says.

"Is it okay if I sit here?"

"Would you like to join me for breakfast?"

Yes! Ten out of ten! No, be nice, girl.

"Okay," she teases. *After all, you are the most interesting thing in the room.*

"If you don't mind, that is."

"No, I'm sorry. Please. That would be . . . nice."

Can't believe his luck. Where did I put those glasses? She pulls the chair out a little, opposite his. "Just let me get something to eat."

Now she has released an avalanche of uncertainty in him, as he shifts nervously, wondering if his breath smells or his hair looks right. Relax, she thinks. It's just me. Just need some company here.

Vibe strolls around the buffet, already bored with its contents. She picks up some slices of bread, along with some cold meats and cucumber, a dollop of fruit preserve and a boiled egg and some tea. She balances the lot on a plate and dumps it on the table in front of him.

"I need coffee in the morning," he observes.

She shakes her head. "Huh-uh. Coffee is bad. No good, no good on a mountain trip. It just dries you out. Hot, weak tea. That's the ticket, laddie."

He nods, a little shell-shocked by her playfulness.

"So what are you doing up here?" she asks him, before he asks her all disapprovingly about her own movements.

"Watching," he says.

"Watching?"

He gropes for an explanation.

"Ah, you're a voyeur. A pervert?"

His straight face breaks into a laugh. "Yes, that's it."

"Well thank goodness we got that sorted out," she winks.

He shakes his head. "No, no. I work up here at the moment."

"At the cabin?"

"No. I am—an investigator."

She examines him with a new filter. "Police?"

Eyes widen a little too much and a pang of guilt strikes. She should really have contacted mountain rescue. . . She is probably in a bunch of trouble, if they ever bother to catch up with her.

"Sort of."

"So you're working?"

He nods. "As an underling, I get to be up here on watch."

"Watching for what?"

He laughs. "Well, I can't say, but you can probably guess part of it."

"It has to do with these football hooligans that are playing hide and seek?"

"Football hooligans?"

Damn, she thinks. I wasn't supposed to have seen them. "I think someone said these gangs were. . ."

He laughs now, more of a smile than a laugh, "So you didn't see any sign of them?"

She points two fingers, like a pistol, at her head. "Oops." A little smile. "I saw they had painted their tribal colours in the snow. N-RBK-N. I assume that means they are connected to the gang fights in international football violence."

He nods. "There is definitely a link, yes. But that's not really why I am here. I am still waiting for something to happen. Stayed put yesterday. Have to move on today."

"Hmmm." She races to swallow a mouthful. "So, are people moving out?"

He gestures to a flat-screen on the wall behind her. Next to the weather forecast is a message from the cabin crew. "Good news, everyone. Rescue says they have rounded up members of two gangs, near here, and that it should be safe for people to move on. They are recommending that everyone go back home, down the mountain to the west. The season is almost over, and it looks as though we shall be closing down early. Transportation can be arranged to pick up vehicles. Bua."

"That's good news. I have to move on today too."

"So how come you are here? I thought they weren't letting anyone come up the mountain."

"Uhhmm. Well. . ." She grins with her teeth and feigned innocence. "I didn't strictly come here with anyone's blessing."

He nods with raised eyebrows. "I sort of guessed that."

Really? Better watch this one. But he seems sweet and innocent. For now.

"What are you doing here?"

She remembers her own lot and her smile fades. "I'm a student."

"You came here to study."

"Not exactly."

He waits patiently, and she continues when he sees that he is not going to give it up.

"You know these little robots that are being tested up here?"

He shakes his head.

"It's been in the news."

"Oh. They're like something NASA built for exploration?"

"Yes, but they are testing them out here, for monitoring the environment, making sure the pathways are properly marked, and for search and rescue. . . stuff like that."

"And you are studying them."

"I am working with the team that designed them," she corrects. "I am designing part of their programming."

"Wow." His eyes seem to lift her off her chair. "That's pretty amazing."

She shrugs. "Not really. It's all pretty standard stuff these days. But it is kind of fun. I had to come up here, because they are not working properly anymore."

"Why not?"

"I don't know. They have lost their controller. . ."

"I know the feeling. . ." he mutters.

". . .and so they have started working without it. But that meant I lost contact with them from Oslo. I only learned that yesterday."

"Isn't there someone up here looking after them?"

"Huhh. There should be. There is supposed to be a team here, of French technicians. I haven't actually met them. They deployed the robots and maintain them, collect samples and double check analyses. Stuff like that. I came here to meet them. but they've gone missing."

He doesn't ask.

"That sounds a bit melodramatic, doesn't it. But I wish I knew where they are."

"Why do you think they are missing?"

"Well. I did get one message from them yesterday. It said to meet them tonight at Leirvassbu."

"And now you can go."

She grins. "Now I can go."

"Well, I am going in almost the same direction today. Perhaps we could walk together."

She smiles. "Thanks. That's kind, but I have to work on the way. I need to find some of my babies."

"You know, it might still be risky walking alone. The mountain police are asking people to go down the mountain, not go farther in."

"And I am not exactly their favourite person. But I have to go. My life depends this. I can't let a bunch of kids with water pistols ruin my degree."

"It's not just the paint guns. They could be dangerous enough. . ."

"I know. It's a bit scary, but I am doubly motivated." Peter Green.

"I could follow you there?"

She winks at him. "Well. Thanks. That is nice of you, but I'll be okay."

He looks anxious. Because of her safety, or because he likes me? "But you'll need company right? I am going in almost the same direction."

"No. Really. Look, I have been planning to meet this guy. It might not be a good idea."

"Oh. Okay. Well. I could walk with you a little while."

"Maybe another time."

*

She walks for half the day, first along the flat river valleys and then up bouldery climbs from plateau to plateau. If sunshine had been her companion on this day, she could have enjoyed the solitary walk, but fate does not always favour one's foolishness. Looming cloud cover is threatening to spawn its devilry and the darkening greys make the landscape more drab than picturesque.

All she sees, along the way, is a pair of German tourists; they also, apparently, have disobeyed the mountain rescue's curfew. They nod a hello and continue on their way without speaking, backpacks looking about four times too big, as though they are to be here for a year at least. Vibe wonders if they have the entire transmitter base station in there – perhaps they are the culprits? Perhaps they are foreign spies who have been sent to retrieve it, like in James Bond? Perhaps she is bored with this isolation.

The clanking of sheep-bells provides a relaxing break to the background of water and wind; it lessens the monotony of clambering over stoney, uneven ground. The sheep roam idly around these parts. They are tagged and marked, apparently someone's property. She wonders how anyone ever catches them in an environment such as this.

It's a full day's trip to Leirvassbu and she has come about half way. She has spent the day watching the behaviour of these little robots in the cluster on her mobile, comparing it to her simulation. It is a relaxing and useful time. It is not really in her nature to court patience, but she is glad of the break, of the time to think. It is interesting to see them climb this steep terrain both slowly, and using balloons and sails, then use gravity itself to power their descents.

She sees that she is nearing the main transmitter point. Curiosity insists that she take a look to see what has happened. No response has been forthcoming from the French, even though a simple answer from them could save her a long trip. She is beginning to feel that she really understands these robots perhaps even better than their creators. The experience yesterday and what she saw in the game. . . it has given her some ideas. They have lost several of the robots though. They are not easy to see, but they are obvious targets for the gangs.

They are supposed to be here!

Vibe settles down on a boulder outcrop to eat her lunch. She has chosen the spot because it is where a medium sized 'bot is located. It is wandering along the river valley, in the soft muddy trails, spraying its paint, with micro-jabs, into large red 'T's, marking the tourist trail on conspicuous rocks. The T's are for tourist, but it is tempting to think that they stand for 'tombstone' for all the places where mountain walkers ran out of steam on the steep slopes.

The process takes some time, since it has to half-manufacture the paint along the way, from the materials it has at hand. These machines are designed to run on practically no power, so nothing they do seems like a day at the races, unless anyone races pot plants. Nevertheless, it holds a certain fascination to watch

cutting edge technology at work.

Interfacing with the robot's network, she can see its nearest neighbours, farther up the mountain. They have seen more action than this lucky valley dweller. From the micro-cams, she can see that part of the neighbour's lens has been splashed with paint.

She feels a blood-lust, a desire for revenge. Fuck these assholes with their guns. Go back to your football stadiums if you want to fight. The VeiVeks also have paint guns, to paint the tourist T's on rocks. They could fight back. If she weren't afraid of losing more of them, she would write the program herself. Divide and conquer. Two teams become five teams. And then it falls apart for them.

What impresses her is how the robots have been able to adapt to their tasks and protect themselves, even without explicit instructions from their overrated central controller. They have not only adapted, but they seem to be continuing their tasks as if nothing has happened. Looking at their action logs, she can see that it is her original multi-agent programming that is at work, in failover mode.

She was always opposed to the central control theory. It always struck her as ironic that the roles were reversed in her collaboration. That the world's professed leader in democracy should be insisting on imposing centralized control, while one of the world's last remaining tightly regulating countries should be asking for autonomy, virtual libertarianism.

Something has been happening here, something that could have destroyed her chance of getting a degree, but which might actually save it inadvertently. She finds herself teetering on the edge of wanting to go back to Oslo and wanting to stay and make the most of this opportunity.

Something about the behaviour of agents is going on that she needs to resolve. Suddenly her simulation is not just about the VeiVeks, but there are human agents too. She needs to factor them in to understand their responses. Part of her is excited; after all, this was her original idea, to test the robots without a central controller. She smiles at the insight that she always gets her way in the end.

She needs to see what happened to the transmitter.

Text to Bea: "Thinking of going up the mountain."

Reply comes back: "Don't forget your rope!"

It is their private joke. Inept mountain walkers somehow believe that you need to have ropes and stuff to climb mountains. It's not like we're climbing Everest or anything. Zig zagging up the slopes on sheep-worn trails works just fine, watching out for the quicksilver patches of ice frozen onto the stones from the previous storm. This is a dangerous time of year to be here.

"To hang myself with?" she replies.

*

By some twist of fate, Vibe seems to have always had her right ear to every loud noise, every open window and every shouting voice. Now she can hear differently through her two ears; a subtle timbre discrepancy and perhaps a different clarity, almost a difference in her ability to understand sound. She is not sure if she can actually hear better or worse, but she can hear a difference. There is something more real about the sound from her right ear.

But now, she can hardly believe either of them. It is quiet in the air. No, not just quiet. Utterly silent. Only when she moves, does she hear the rustling of her own clothing, her heavy backpack. When the wind stops, in the mountains, when nothing is moving except for the almost indiscernible fledgling flakes of snow, the air seems to suck the sound out of the world.

Now she knows what it is like to be in outer space. In the hall of the gods. It is like standing in the anechoic chamber she worked in, as part of her physics classes at College. There is a complete absence of sound that feels so strange, so alien, that the pressure inside her head seems to want to escape. Decompression. It is like being in a vacuum.

It hurts her ears.

And then, it begins to snow.

At the base of the mountain, on which the main controller transmitter should be located, Sara feels and deals with a palpable sense of awe. The apparently impossible challenge of reaching the summit of this towering peak is only a barrier in her mind. The feeling is one of dread and excitement, mixed with an irresistible energy. The power of the sensation is almost sexual; she senses a tingling down below at the primality of the experience.

This challenge, like all challenges, is solved by looking far ahead into the goal, and by putting one foot in front of the other, concentrating on each step of the path. The sum of many short steps is a long journey. As long as you are going in the right direction, the details are not important. You will arrive.

Each stone is an obstacle, but each brings her closer to her goal. All together, they are insurmountable; one by one, they are trivial. This is the hacker's code, she thinks. I shall hack you, mountain.

Her stomach hurts too, just to remind her that she is not the master of everything. Nature is still laughing at her. She loathes that time of the month. It hardly seems fair, under the circumstances, to add insult to injury. You'd think that someone would have found a way to stop these unpleasant biological processes by now. But she always has her way. She is not so easily manipulated.

Then snow begins to fall heavily.

As she plods up the relentless incline, she enters the familiar dreamy meditation of walking, hardly noticing the path she is following. Half of her mind detaches and ponders the developments of the last two weeks.

Imagine, she thinks, the disruption of these criminal vandals by our little

robotic guerrillas. To make these little machines trick humans, humans driven by simple motivations, into acting out different scenario. Not the one they have planned, but one that fragments them and makes them self destruct. To tease them into a different game. She knows that it is possible. She and Bea have played this strategy in the VR.

It is just a matter of adding some new states, of extending the global transition matrix to model the humans like dumb agents. It is not as if they are behaving as intelligent problem-solvers; they are just slaves to some simple minded doctrines, reacting like insects, and doing very well.

Build some new closures. Bend the top level rules. The humans become part of the simulation. The VeiVeks could infiltrate them implicitly. They would never know they were being played.

The dorks were herding her with paint balls. She could herd them with her babies, except that they are supposed to have gone now. The world is playing this game all the time, she thinks.

Wind returns in subtle chimes, as she climbs. At first it is pendulous, growing in intensity as if on a build-up to a final tidal explosion of ice. Then, as she comes over the rise, it seems to blast like a continuous signal. Cold, half-wet snow assails her bare flesh. She pulls up the hood on her jacket and winces to keep stinging snowflakes out of her eyes.

Racing air expands in its assault, threatening to blow her away, as she passes over the rim of a half-plateau. It wants to guide her implicitly, pushing her away from her real goal. That is how you influence a herd, she thinks. This is how to control the unwilling: a constant pressure, a relentless push. This is what marketeers do with their brain-dead advertising campaigns. This is what she can do with her little agents. The wind and the tide. She would smile at the simplicity of it, were it not for the cramped paralysis in her frozen face.

I could patent this, she smiles hypothetically.

“Yes,” she says to herself. The bloody taste of her gasping breath makes her swallow. “Yes.” That’s it.

On the plateau, rainy snow sleets and the wind gusts. She feels exposed here. Alone again. Where is the support that she is supposed to feel from her advisors? You just think this is a waste of time.

A gust of wind slices through her clothing, breaking her absent thought, and the world darkens from fantasy into hard, wet, mossy stone, freckled with fast-ening snowflakes. Pain and cold. A gripping world of sensation, near the top of this little mountain: the experience is a privilege shared by few these days. She should embrace it rather than abhor it. There is no cleaner, sharper reality than a trip to the mountains, she thinks.

Look at me now, Mr. Hart, Mr. Lindgren, you wouldn’t understand. How could you? There are people out here doing real work here and your divine jobs

are just to get in the way. What's this money to you anyway? You don't have to care about us, after all. I am just a column in your spreadsheet.

I too could be in my spanking office sitting in front of my cheap-ass computer burning my eyes out on simulation. But I'm afraid our best philosophers all agree: experience is the key. No amount of simulation could teach her what she is learning here.

She pauses for breath only briefly. It does not do to stop when you are plodding up an incline. You might never start again.

The control transmitter for the VeiVeks should be located up here, according to her mobile. It should be a small tower structure, like a trig' point, at the local summit of this hill, clamped with metal ties to prevent it being blown away. This is the main transmitter for remote controlling and monitoring the little robots. It is not registering on any frequencies, so it is certainly not working. But is it even here?

Onward and upward. Ad astra.

The temperature has fallen sharply again, and the snow is sticking now.

I should be going down, not up, she thinks.

The icy wind begins to make the top of her head ache with cold, her nose is full of ice crystals. Fine snow dust, too cold to form large flakes, blows like desert sand across the path ahead, threatening to bury it, swirling in little eddies. She should get out of here, before it starts to get dangerous.

She has been caught unawares in bad weather before, been so cold to the bone that even the slightest movement hurt, and those parts of her body which could still feel at all, were tender to the slightest touch. She doesn't want that again.

It should be here soon. Her frozen, shaking hands pull a gap between her gloves and jacket to look at the wrist band screen. Her mobile confirms that this is the place. She is close. It should be here. She wanders around, as visibility worsens. She does not have long left before she will have to turn around and go back.

Then she sees it: a cairn, a little Darth Varder, where a shelter has been built, from loose boulders lying around it. She jogs towards it, bending stiff, frozen knees. A few wires, a brace, tied to the rock, a mounting bracket. This is where the transmitter should be. But not anymore.

A few fragments, barely a trace.

The control transmitter is gone.

17

Something is growing in the clouds; dense, thick cumulonimbus clouds, but high up. A column of yellowy, sulphurous discolouration. From 25,000 feet (why do they still measure altitude in feet?), she can not see much, nor make out what it is.

“What is that?” she asks the woman next to her.

“What is what?”

“That,” she says, pointing. Her neighbour glances at the place briefly and shrugs. “Hmm. I don’t know.” Then it is back to her magazine.

Preeta sighs inside herself as if to say: Why are people not more curious? How can that magazine, full of petty, concocted intrigue be more interesting?

Coming in to land over London, the plane descends below the cloud cover, revealing flat watery fields, with river tendrils snaking dendritically outward in smooth meanders. It really is a green and pleasant land, she thinks. Well, green and brown, actually. The agricultural patchwork is almost perfect. A mosaic of cultivated fields, tiled and shuffled.

Patches of forest punctuate the landscape, cooped up with British orderliness. The villages, or at least their rooftops, look like archaeological ruins of a Roman wall. And all over, small oxbow lakes are the ruins of formerly vital rivers; the bend which fell off the snake, a trick of Möbius.

“Are you returning to the U.K.?” the woman asks her.

“No it’s my first time,” she says simply. These are the first words they have uttered in the eight or nine hours of the journey.

As the plane enters London, the probing avenues of the city carve sculptures across the landscape. They are clearly visible from up here. They wind and curve organically like the fossilized remains of long-extinct life-forms, not like the ramshackle chaos of Asia, nor the orderly lattice-work of a city as in Manhattan. It looks organic, but not wild, not out of control—more like an organism, curled up along side the river and that petrified into bricks and mortar, or an English garden made of stone. Is this the remains of Empire? she wonders.

Her flight is drawn into ventricle four of the heart of this beast; it is still pumping people and aeroplanes around its diseased corpus after all this time, even as the memory of empire fades and withers. Heathrow looks huge, like a city in its own right. But it looks completely alien: a world in which people flow like blood through little arterial corridors, arriving in brightly coloured vessels,

carrying this breath, this life-force into and out of a weary angina-ridden pump, docking with the alveoli of its pulmonary terminals to recharge them for a new journey.

Please wait until the plane comes to a complete standstill. . .and then rush for the exit like a ramshackle invasion force.

Preeta disembarks (or 'deplanes' as her American neighbour calls it, seeming to imply some kind of parasitic encumbrance), into the newly refurbished terminal feeling both the uncertainty of the unknown and excitement of the new.

She is pumped through the terminal.

Time passes quickly in the flow. All she can see ahead is a queue of bodies, lining up to pass through the security scanner ahead. They look like the crowds of refugees she has seen in pictures of the conflicts: sad, tired people staggering towards an inevitable fate. They look crumpled, having been packed into their long distance carriers like so much waste-paper in a dumpster. They look like her, as she was before her escape.

A man bumps into a child, who drops an ice-cream on a small island of tiles in an otherwise carpeted floor. The fallen whip leaves an arty smear of raspberry whirl, spread out in a creamy flame, like some primordial galactic explosion, forged in the very spark of creation. A temporal ray is fired into the æther from these spacetime coordinates.

She can almost see it happening as if, somehow, in slow motion. From this incident, great things will result; wheels will turn, continents will slide and time itself will carry the responsibility of redemption. The child's happiness shatters, first into automatic but embryonic tears, which falter and dry as an unusual beauty in the pattern seduces his instinct for aesthetics. From the memory of this incident, the child is destined to follow that ray. He has been marked by fate; he will go on to make great works of art, championing a modern, expressionistic style of explosive colour. At this great nexus interchange, at this heart of the airwaves, wheels of fate are set in motion, so as to change the world. Preeta is here, at the hub. She saw it happen.

The queue does not seem to be abating and the minutes are falling like the autumn leaves. Why is she stressed by this delay? After all she has been through, why should this affect her? She could miss her connection, yes, but what could possibly happen to compare with the trials and threats she has endured?

This is just a part of her adventure. She should savour the moment. Perhaps it is the sense that she now has a duty to perform, that is to say: a duty that was offered freely, as a choice rather than as an obligation.

Everything seems too small.

She imagined huge halls and grand open spaces, ultra-modern design, and everything run with military precision and grave superiority. Instead, she sees people laughing and joking informally, chatting about their wives and husbands,

as though they were hanging over the garden fence with their neighbours in some city slum.

For a people with the reputation for having revolutionized the world with the machinery of industry, the British are not what she would have expected. They seem almost flippant and self derogatory. There is no pride in these faces, just complacency. "Duty free, anyone? Spirits, perfumes, used cars. . .?"

London is supposed to be a big city. Here it seems as though the airport walkways were designed for little people. The curiously British carpeting in these hallways makes the journey to her next flight seem like a trek along the hallway of someone's house to visit the bathroom.

*

Wrist-mobile, searching for a new service: it pauses with a reconfiguration challenge. Is she willing to install and run a VCA here? The Pervasive Environment Service (affectionately known as the PES dispenser) understands the need for security in such a dense stream of unpredictability. They don't care what you *have* on your mobile as long as you run a voluntary cooperation agent that monitors your behaviour. It is a device that makes sure your system is not transmitting something that it believes to be dangerous. If your mobile refuses to cooperate with the security system, it will be isolated and you can even be deported.

Out of the security embolism, squirted into the lungs of the beast, she scans the airport terminal for a bookshop, for something new and challenging to read. Amidst the perfume and cosmetics, she finds one. It has a good selection of books here, both paper and digital. Novels, new and old. Science, biography. Politics. Noam Chomsky, Arundhati Roy. . .these are people who see through the crap. You would never find these books on the shelves of her local bookstore. Maybe in Singapore. She laps up these classic books about power struggles. Preeta has seen her share of political struggle. She can identify almost anyone's struggle with her own.

After she fled her family, and began to study, she belonged to an anti-dam movement. These were the books she valued then. She is well acquainted with the ways in which the Indian government has twisted words and arguments to get their way—to convince the people that they are really working in their best interests, when really they are just feathering the nests of the ruling elite. All governments are surely the same. Some of them believe that those ideals are compatible: that a ruling elite's pleasure is the way forward for the poor also, but the fifty million people, forcibly displaced and impoverished to start those dam projects, are now kept silent. Now, the job that she was being asked to do is no different to that. It is just another propaganda engine. It made her day, even as a child to see the BJP so humiliated by the poor – when Sonya Ghandi, an Italian for heaven's sake, has done what everyone thought was impossible and won the

election. Our right wing values have made India prosperous and modern, at least for 17 percent of the population. The rest will drown in the flood plains.

It seems so distant now; her senses are saturating in this new adventure. She is a collage, a curry of leftovers from other people's plans and wishes. She has not so much chosen her adventures as been driven from place to place, running for her freedom at each juncture. Now she is off again.

The terminal seems to be full of people from the Indian subcontinent, working in the shops and running airport services. They seem to form a subcontinent of their own. Did they also flee from their pasts?

The travellers, on the other hand, are a different race. Here, amongst them, she feels that she has entered a different plane of existence. No pun intended. The people here walk as if in a trance, holding mobiles and talking distantly to voices in another realm. They look happy, deliberate or sometimes stressed, but they show no sign of being aware of the physical realm around them. It portends of a nightmare scenario.

It is fortunate that we are not truly telepathic, she thinks. There should be an off-switch, even if people don't always know how to use it. Without it, no-one would ever meet physically. They would loathe one another, find each other repellant. *How wearisome your thoughts, your voice, have become to me!* They would simply pass through one another like ghosts, never have sex, never have children. The race would die out. She hopes that it is just a function of the airport to holds these lost spirits. Somehow the bustling immediacy of Asia seems less oppressive than it did.

She checks the time, NTP adjusted for zone and daylight saving. Two hours to go before her connecting flight. She looks at her pale beige slacks and open topped sandals. It is warm here in the airport, but she almost perished in the antarctic winter of the flight.

I have to get clothes.

She is going from one of the hottest places on the planet to one of the coldest. She needs warm clothes and shoes, and her mystery X has even supplied her with a little money for her relocation.

She walks along the concourse of the terminal.

The clothes shops are mostly high fashion, business garbs, suits. She needs something warm, not something audacious and brightly coloured. There are virtual warehouses filled with bottled scents, perfumes and colognes; music and video entertainment, chocolate and periodicals are stacked up by the shop-load. She finds all the same brands Kit-Kat, Coco Cola, Pepsi, Cadbury, Nestlé, Evian. Probably she should not even be thinking these names; they are registered TM thoughts. Burger King, Pret à manger? Sounds like an invitation to wantonly vandalize the Christian nativity? Fine marmalades and preserves, meats and luxury foods. Harrods. Starbucks. Sock shop. Tie shop. Sushi.

All the brands.

No practical clothes.

Billboard photographs of fashion models, like the stylized apparitions in fashion magazines: compare them to the faces in the terminal. They are not alike. Terminal people have skin texture, like Asians. The coloured shadows around the eyes are not always there. They are not as decorative. The travelling women are not as concerned with the signal they are projecting as the posterized avant garde. Why should they be? They do not even notice one another.

Preeta wanders about the concourse, avoiding the small electric cars with their annoying piezo-electric ticks, mowing down travellers relentlessly and for no apparent reason. She finds tweed costumes for the English gentleman, Philippa K. fashion and design. Clothes for men. Fashion for women. She finds a shoe shop selling high heeled decanters, stiletto vases, and warm boots, Hope springs eternal. The prices mean little to her, but she knows her budget and she has been warned to find something. This does not seem to be the place to buy clothes to survive in. These are clothes to parade in, to negotiate in, to seduce in.

She has not owned a coat designed for warmth since she was a child. Preeta finds a sweater that looks warm and not too ungainly and buys it out of desperation, along with a pair of fur lined boots. She will have to survive with a poorly matched woollen frock and feet stuffed into Koala bears. Besides, it is surely better to buy clothes in the country she is going to. That way, she knows that they will be the right kind.

The wandering makes her legs ache and the dry air of the flight has dehydrated her. Preeta realizes that she is thirsty and she sees people sitting by huge windows, looking out at the airfield. She feels attracted by a sitting group of people. Humanity. Not molecules in transit.

The lure of daylight is strong in her after the long journey in venal captivity. This discoloured electrical phosphorescence is no excuse for the missing sun. It is not light and it is barely illumination. It is not here to nourish but to deprive: to make all the goods and glitter shine by comparison to the gloom of the Lung. Well, she needs to glimpse the other side of the membrane.

There is a roar from the light-bathed coffee shop lounge. Ahead, a group of travellers is momentarily united in involuntary frenzy, releasing animal instincts so immaculately pent up by voluntary solitary confinement. She sees a green splash of a soccer game on the board. It is an ugly sport; not much of an improvement on the days when Mayan citizens kicked the skulls of criminals around their ziggurats. She prefers swimming, if anything.

She sits down with her cup of chai, fortune acquiring her a seat in front of the window. Chai does not smell quite right, but it is hot and wet. It is the first time that she has felt able to relax in the last week. Chai, milk. Sugar.

A moment of solitude in a crowd. She loosens her wrist strap and taps her

mobile out of sleep mode. She sees her name. She sees messages. She recalls her death.

*

To her family, Preeta is dead.

She was born in Srinagar, just before the turn of the millennium, and spent the first eighteen years of her life there, happy and accepting of life, of what it seemed to be. In the beginning it seemed to be a happy time, a place to run and play and learn at the local library or video complex. Then she grew older; they all did.

Slowly, she saw her brothers and sisters married off and sold like cured meats, in a pitiful play of antiquated family politics, in the wailing death throes of an antiquated and corruptly micro-managed society.

It was not all according to her parents' plan. Her brother spent a week in a prison cell for exhibiting excessive flamboyance at his wedding. Rules and more stupid rules. The chef's union allows no more than 7 dishes at a wedding, or the family can be fined. He refused to listen to their objections, and ended up punching one of regulators on the nose for interfering with his decadence. The inspectors said they were preserving the modesty of their culture and that the men in her family were flagrantly abusing their status. Mr. Mustafa complained to the police about her brother, and Sanjiv was thrown in gaol by the elders.

Later it was her turn. But she did not want to be married off into a dead-end life of ignorance and pre-arranged domestic servitude. She pleaded with her father.

When she first complained, he told her that she was foolish and he struck her. Her brothers bombarded her with macho-vellian bullying, whining about a tradition they have learned by rote. That was when she resolved to leave for Singapore. For a life in a free world. They tried to lock her up in a room of the house. When she ran away, they could not accept the shame of her refusal, to be forced into marriage. Though they did not, could not kill her, she is disowned, rejected, eradicated. Family honour.

She met visiting relatives as a child, relatives who had fled to Norway, as refugees. It was years ago, but she never met foreigners other than tourists before moving to Bangalore to make her new life. Strange that she should be travelling there now.

She found her way as far as Bangalore, by catching a lift with a fat man who looked at her small frame with an ugly repressed hunger, so clearly signalled by his shortness of breath and barking suggestion. However much it pains her to admit it, she owes a debt of gratitude to Mota. He was a basically decent man and she took advantage of his frustrations, shamelessly, even as he took advantage of

her skills with computers. He arranged for her a job, and she was able to finish her education and make some money. One day she will go back and thank him properly.

So what is she running to now? What would she like to be? Excessive, lively, unrestrained and outspoken. Moved beyond the threshold of passion. Is that what she will find here in the West?

Where can she find a warm coat?

*

Violent words ricochet off the airwaves. Another threatening message arrives for her. *We are watching you.* Threats. Why exactly do they bother? She has lived with threats for half her life. What does she have to lose by leaving? What do they hope to accomplish with these threats? We are watching you? Clearly they are not, since she has come this far.

They did not expect her to get out of the country, surely. So she beat them.

Didn't she?

She has known about the existence of small time gangs, of course. Her own apartment in Kuala Lumpur has been broken into more than once by home-raiders, but she has been fortunate to be absent during the raids. Lately there have been girl gangs and there are rumours that the Russian mafia has moved in and taken over parts of the high tech operations. Preeta has never paid much attention to such talk. She would rather not know about this dark side of her world. But the meteorite seems to have landed in her front room.

Perhaps it was only a matter of time before her high profile company, and its dealings with online gaming, became known. And she has been a key person in that work, perhaps by good luck, for whatever reason.

The messages have been arriving at irregular intervals, terrorising her, threatened to beat and rape her. In return for safety, she would give them access to users' identities. The theft of self. When you own someone's identity, you own all that they have. The virtual reality game gives them a completely new pathway to this kind of extortion. Just as the game consortium would like to use the game for manipulating opinion, so these criminal organizations want to use it for a more direct theft of individuality.

Planes are moving out there. White missiles towed across a cloudy sky. They accelerate impossibly and lift their tonnes of fuselage high into the gathering darkness. The brightly coloured tail fins of their brothers and sisters, on the ground, are lined up like an odd avant garde art installation: painted animals tied up at the corral, just like in the Westerns. Preeta breathes uneasily and feels exposed, grateful for her apparent escape from shackles and threats, but uneasy about where she is headed.

She needs to talk to Claire Thambusamy. She dials in the VR, on sound only, bouncing her call off the forwarding base that she left behind in her workstation. It will make her call appear to come from within Kuala Lumpur. She does not want to hasten the discovery of her departure by her pursuers. She wants to hear what is happening at home. Home?

“Has he forgiven me yet? What happened with the visitors?”

She tells her that the visitors have been digging into their organization, asking after her. They can see that something is not going according to plan and they are worried about the security of the game. They are missing her. She should come by.

It was a mistake for Mota to send her home. Now he cannot get her back.

She tells Claire that she thinks she has been threatened by a criminal gang and that they should all be careful. Claire is shocked and worried. Preeta tells her that she will lie low for a while. She says nothing more.

Then she sends a message to her contact—to her mystery X. They send her a code and she installs it. It is safe to talk openly now.

A moment of panic rises through her calm acceptance of his promises. She knows of stories of girls who have been lured into foreign countries by the mafia, had their travel credentials confiscated and forced to work in prostitution. Locked away in rooms without money or clothes. Beaten if they try to escape.

Suddenly there is the thought that she might have been tricked here, out of one mafia operation and into another. Is that to be the new function of the game? Sex trafficking? But it doesn't seem likely. That only happens to girls and children who do not have jobs, who are destitute and desperate. This was not like that. And the country, Norway has a reputation for international justice. She is partly reassured.

She tells her X that she does not want to give up her travel credentials, that she has not been able to find any clothes to buy. She wants to tell him that she is afraid, but that would suggest too much trust. Instead she says that she is looking forward to having a room of her own with a shower.

X tells her: “You will meet with our coordinator in Oslo. He will meet you at the airport in Oslo. His name is Edward Bishop. He works for the Norwegian F.B.I.. Don't worry, our agents are watching your progress to make sure that you are not being followed.”

They probably wouldn't be helping her if they didn't think she could help them with their own problems. What are they doing for the girls in Bangkok or Bosnia or Murmansk?

Preeta always thought that Malaysia was pretty up'n'coming. More like the West than the gangs of Mumbai. She begins to reevaluate her view of the world.

When you grow up in a box, you have a strange world view. On the one hand, you yearn for freedom, but on the other the thought of it scares you stiff. Where

are you going to put your boundaries? How far can you go? Is it safe? What is she headed for?

What is she doing?

*

Flung back into the aero-spatial aorta, she finds herself across the North Sea, terrified, in a rattling jet, huge gaping vents opening in the wings. The aircraft depletes into Gardemoen airport in its so-called controlled descent.

She falls into a snowy forest, with rivers and trees and broken mirrors of water, reflecting an ebbing orb of struggling light. The plane re-enters a human sphere from clear blue freedom, plunging her into a winter world, with winter hearts and wintery faces.

“Preeta Dhawan? My name is Ed Bishop. It is a pleasure to finally meet you. We have been talking for some time. We shall look after you here.”

Preeta has not seen many white men or girls so close. Strange to see them now in the flesh: that pasty skin, milky white and ghostly. And the freckles. Is that some kind of disease? She is both fascinated and perplexed. It has an oddly attractive quality. Sexy is not a word she would have been allowed to use anywhere in her past, but here there is no other word that will do. She feels drab and out of place. She is too dark. She needs new clothes.

“We have found you an apartment in the centre of town for now. It’s student accommodation, but it is quite comfortable. It is close to the medical centre, and to the Asian community region of the city. And a short distance from our team.”

“You can get settled in and I’ll take you to where you’ll be working tomorrow.”

“I have only managed to get a temporary visa for you,” he adds. “It lasts for three months. We’ll see how it goes after that.”

Thank you for your help.

“Oh – one more thing. I brought you a fresh mobile, with network access. It will help you to settle in and find your way around.”

She nods, afraid to say thank you too any times. A new identity suddenly sounds like a perfect idea.

I have grown tired of conformity, she thinks.

I am bored with myself.

18

Fresh cantaloupe, water melon, pineapple. English muffin grilled with butter and cheese. The young waiter regarded him strangely and, without inquiry, returned with a sliced and toasted blueberry cup-cake, with a plate of butter and a slice of processed cheese. Apparently no great violence was done, in his mind, by cremating the muffin, but the thought of putting cheese on it was too much like draping the flag over a corpse. When Den explained about English muffins, he was re-instructed by his supervisor, and the perfect breakfast ensued.

Seldom has Den felt so alive as he does now, here on this San Diego hotel patio.

The last few days have been a 'roller-coaster', as his American hosts would say, a ride of curious ambivalence towards his new friends. America is a lively study in contradictions.

This wanton love child, sired in the ultimate blending of American beauties: a *ménage à trois* horribilis of fledgling divorcees: Silicon Valley, The Pentagon, and Hollywood, has taken on a life of its own. Now heading for adolescence, having seen some of the world, the progenitors are scrambling to save their creation from moral corruption at the hands of infidels in the cheap outsourcing nanny countries. Isn't it the ultimate irony? The very nations the corporate West relies on, to power its bloated lifestyle, are the incubators of terror and instability, so untrusted and yet so exploited by the fear-mongers of Washington.

And what about this trio? Silicon Valley and the Pentagon are no surprise, but Hollywood? As David Bowie understood, even in the nineteen seventies, it was the corporate Mickey Mouse's destiny, albeit on America's tortured brow, to become the cash-cow of its creator, Disney. But now, with a little genetic manipulation, the government has morphed Mickey into a virtual reality simulation of more bullish proportions. It is not just a cash cow, but a multi-headed Hydra guarding the entrance to the Golden Fleecing. If not life from Mars, then the next best phoney future-scape to rival any of Bowie's seventies bad trips.

"Hello."

A vice disturbs him from his morning reverie. He looks up to see three Ordinary People, out of place in this utopia of money and power. A tall thin man, with short-clipped balding hair, floral shirt, baggy shorts and sandals. A shorter man, rounder with longer, darker hair and a dark beard and crooked nose, also in floral shirt and slacks. A woman, or perhaps girl, with short, red, spiky hair

and army-shop pants, sleeveless top, running shoes without socks. A shiny stud protrudes from under her lip. She has small round ear-rings.

"Dennis Morris?"

"Yes."

"Excuse us interrupting your breakfast, sir. Mind if we have a word?"

They seem friendly, filled with expectation. They are a welcome break from his work. "Uhm. Okay. What about?"

They exchange glances, electing a spokesperson.

Den remembers his manners. "Oh. Would you like to join me for breakfast?"

*

The troop is a delegation. Their odd-ball appearances are not strange at all, only mundane. Has he already forgotten this? Three lightening rods short circuit him to the grassy roots of the Californian earthen base. Zap.

A conversation begins; they calmly and pleasantly introduce themselves as members of the UCSD University staff. They have issues. Not so much a confrontation as a tangent. Two hours pass without mobile interruption or wireless agitation.

They are activists, trouble-makers: anti-this, no-to-that. Den has never really had much time for No people. But they are charming and they are a refreshing diversion from the sedative luxury of these past days. They began their 'interest group' in the early 2000's when the San Diego power companies privatized and increased power prices by three hundred and eighty percent over night. There was a popular uprising, in which people refused to pay. They tell him that, coming from the U.K., he ought to remember, since the same crooks bought the British power grid and increased prices to fleece the more docile British public. That was probably before Den was interested in such things. They have been following corporate corruption every since.

At first, Den listens as if researching an adversary, looking into the face of the unknown soldier on the opposite side of a war. Then transmogrification: a battery of impulses resonating in his thoughts. Little needles, pin-pricks of reason, puncturing assumptions and fraying loose ends in his consciousness.

They thank him for his interesting talk. First flatter him to let down his guard. Then they express their worries. Not too strongly. Don't want to sound like lunatics. Then the pin-pricks begin. Working him over, grinding him down.

They talk of history, of the beginnings of the free market economy. The Chicago boys' laissez-faire dream, which the Chilean Pinochet thrust upon feudal poverty in South America, turning the country into a power house of short-lived productivity and ending it with a new class of Those Who Haves and of Those Who Have Nots. A Nobel prize in economics rests on this project, but failure is the penalty for such hubris.

They talk about the erosion of civil liberties and fundamental rights in the free market West. They remind him of *Magna Carta*, which surely any Englishman would understand. Den cannot remember much about it from school. They talk about the separation of church and state, written into the American constitution, during a time of greater eloquence and insight.

They talk about the Fear and Ignorance tactics of government, a strategy to preserve the old style of leadership in which only the privileged classes were educated and the workers simply did as they were told. They explain to him how this is fundamentally at odds with the modern Knowledge-based Society, where expertise lies with the workers, not their leaders. They tell him about the use of the church to shackle people, through guilt, to a higher authority.

They talk about the game and its role in this strategy. How it is playing below the belt, attempting all the tricks in the book to tip the scales in favour of Western Corporate Multi-nationals, essentially the U.S. oligarchs. A new arena for persuasion. with possibilities which he himself is developing.

Then they tell him about the alternatives. More Nobel prizes: forget the Milton Friedmans; remember the Armtaya Sens and humane development, the role of social conscience. Forget the Bible Belt power-mongers and return to a time of enlightenment.

Den feels a smile growing inside him. He likes these people, but they fulfil his best stereotypes of academics, lost in a dream of nineteen sixties nostalgia. Free love. Make peace not war. Was there ever a serious side to all that?

He cannot deny their facts. The television channels are heavily populated by political bias and Evangelical religious broadcasting. Some people would say that both they and he work in the business of public brainwashing. He has never quite been able to swallow these Americanized mass religious gatherings though. They remind him too much of pictures of Nazi Germany, with Hitler standing in front of the German rallies. The main difference is the badly artificial Evangelical sun-tans, and hair-pieces that could have been stuck on from a poor photograph, cut out of a seventies mail-order catalogue. They are easily recognizable by their vapid smiles and their anti-abortionist badges, stuck onto expensive suits, paid for by the brainwashed addicts who listen to them. His bitterness towards them surprises even him; he has never lived here, but he has seen the tendrils spread to the U.K. and Europe.

The politics of this are the essence of it. There is nothing spiritual going on here, he thinks. They are right. It is pure indoctrination. And he knows that it is has been a comfortable power-base for the Republicans, since the nineteen-eighties. Bush had won eighty-one percent of the evangelical vote. He didn't need the Catholics anymore, not that the Catholics were exactly apolitical, but they are dying.

"Please, Den," they say. "Don't be dazzled by King John or the Pope. If this

game is about bringing people together and giving people a voice, then great. But if it is just a cover story for more corporate corruption, a way of locking down the last public soap-box, it needs to be stopped. You ever been to Hyde Park?”

*

The path through the campus winds around and he loses his way several times, as he whistles his way along the path. The warmth from the paving radiates back onto his legs. Next time he must remember to bring shorts. Ticklish beads of sweat run down the backs of his knees.

There is not much time left on this visit. Time to make the most of Cathy. They still have more to talk about. They have work to do.

They seem to share the same dream, he has discovered. The dream of securing their own futures before things fall apart at a higher level. Both of them can see the precariousness of the current political climate. Money could dry up in no time, unless they play their part. And it seems that they could play that part together. Their jobs have almost become sidelines to the resonance of their common ambition.

“We now have special instructions to monitor communications in virtual meetings,” she told him in between their nocturnal communions. “Anywhere people meet in groups by arriving all at the same time, or within a few minutes of each other. That is an organized meeting. Intelligence hawks are pushing for greater power to gather in data from such meetings. The trouble is that the only way it can realistically be done is by distributing the task out to every user’s own mobile. That means altering everybody’s software. It would not be practical, even if it were legal. Even the NSA could not muster the computing power to analyze every meeting in the entire game. In other words, they need us to come up with a server-side compromise that gives the U.S. government the power of escrow on the anonymity of players.”

She sat up beside him, pulling him onto his side in a playful mood. “By joining together we could build a kind of net-wide telescope. A SETI program for the game. The search for hostile life *out there*.” Then she took his middle finger in her hand. and placed it on the inside of her knee. “When we detect an alert situation, they then want us to be able to trace. . .” she drags his finger from her knee “. . .the participants. . .” up her thigh “. . .through the net.” to the place between her legs “to the source. And infiltrate deep to find their prize.”

He pauses for breath as he recalls.

It has become increasingly clear to Den that her little favour was more of a personal matter than anything to do with her job. Cathy Kim is looking for her future in all this, just as he is. She could manage without him, if she were only interested in research, so there must be more to it than that. He can’t fault her for

wanting more. Maybe there is a journey they can make together. It seems like an opportunity to be taken seriously, as long as he does not become too distracted from his main goals. This trip is not turning out exactly as he planned it.

This is uncertain ground, he thinks. What am I getting myself into? He continues up the path.

Den's mobile finds Kim in the gym. It is a large light room with large windows looking out onto a grassy area. The room has an unpleasant tang of sweat and rubber and leather fittings. She is standing in front of a huge wall-covering mirror, lifting small weights and admiring the slight but muscular figure he was admiring only hours before.

He smiles at her. "I've always wondered," he says, "how the mirror helps."

"Power of reflection. I'm almost done."

She pumps the weights with a discipline that Den admires. She is not distracted. He likes that. She could almost have been made for him.

"I had a visit this morning."

"Uh huh?"

"From some of the protesters, we have been hearing about in the news."

"What? Are you okay?"

"Yes, yes. Nothing like that. They were very charming actually."

"Really. . ."

"They seemed to have the whole thing figured out."

"And what did they want from you?"

"Understanding mainly. And I think they see me as being able to prevent some kind of misuse of the game. I really don't know why you all think I am so important."

She stops her pumping and walks over to him, her skin shiny with sweat..

"Thing about value is that you are just as valuable as people think you are. It's a self-fulfilling prophesy. It doesn't matter how it started. It's what becomes of it that matters."

Of course, he knows about this effect in marketing. Drop a grain of salt into a saturated solution and it will make a big diamond-like crystal. So, deal with it. Feel like a diamond, Den.

"No one at the brunch seemed to be that bothered about the news breaking like this."

"Of course not. They do not mind these diversions. It helps to keep the conspiracy theories alive. They throw a cloud of uncertainty and doubt over their real motives."

"Money."

She smiles. "It's that simple. Of course there is more at stake, but I don't think government really believes it at this stage."

“Government can do whatever it pleases here. The channels of corruption run deep. People have been passive for too long.”

“You know, I meant to tell you that I also found a rogue billboard.”

“You did.”

“In Dubai. The text was corrupted. It looked like a programming error.”

“Ok, maybe we can go look at it later.”

“I sent in a bug report. I’m hoping to get some analysis back from Malaysia”

“All right, never mind that, handsome. We should find out about this senator friend of yours.”

He groans on the inside. She wheedled it out of him while straddled across him, just out of reach, last night. The General was right. Buttons and zippers are no protection.

“I thought you wanted to look at the data to help law enforcement?”

“Maybe it’s the same thing. If we are going to get in on this deal, we’ll need some leverage. Something tells me that your senator friend is not a hundred percent legit.”

“In that case we’ll need a creative advantage.”

“Well I suppose I could sleep with him,” she winks.

Den experiences a momentary flash of something. Jealousy? No. He wipes out the thought. Possessiveness is not a quality that he can afford if he wants to ascend in the ranks.

“What do you think he knows?”

“I think he is just an envoi.”

“So who has the real power?”

“That’s the funny thing,” she says. “I am not sure that anyone does. This is one of those self-sustaining conspiracies. Everyone believes in each other because everyone believes in each other. That is the nature of celebrity. You know, like the boy who lifted himself by his bootstraps. There’s no centre of power.”

“So how do you infiltrate an organization that has no centre?”

She hums.

“Well, I suppose you could try to create a centre. Make a splash that gets you noticed. Then let the ripples spread. You have already done that.”

“So the trick is in keeping their attention until they remember you – and treat you as a player. . .”

She winks. “Networking, Den. Networking.”

II. GOOD INTENTIONS FRAUGHT

19

They don't come here to talk. They graze, cattle on the liquid commons. Meet down at the poleaxe. Face in the trough.

"Pinta Theakstons an' a packet o' crisps, love."

"Lager and lime, eh Carol?"

In front of their wooden bar; horse trappings and photographs, symbols of a bygone time. Escape, into that flat beer of the English countryside, from nagging wives or pent up lives. Birds on a wire-less.

"Fish'n'chips here, petal."

The surrogate friend and replacement spouse, welcomed by the lady of the house.

But they are still on call, by ear-piece or wrist-strap, or traditional bell. Can't close the canal, shut the sluice. The high water-mark of domestic surveillance pursues.

Talk to the girls on the blower; if you know 'er.

Never mind the Mrs., she's too busy talking to hers.

Kids, fun to play with for a while. Quick shag and then down the pub.

To graze, on liquid haze.

It's our cheap, private, virtual realm.

"Snakebite, love. Shandy for our Sharon."

20

Jonas watches the drunken man bossing his wife and sighs on the inside. That man might think he is in control, but one day the elastic will be stretched to its limit and she will snap back at him with a killing force. For now the power trip of a bottle of liquor will sustain the illusion of his dominance.

The incident brings back a suppressed unease. These domestic altercations have been a constant companion to him too. He is no innocent.

Others in the bar are starting to stare and predictably a bouncer is making his way through the crowded bar to eject the pair into the outside world where they will be able to continue the abuse in the privacy of Oslo's mind-your-business streets. A young girl, out for a drink with her friends, watches with a look of horror at the pair, as though this were somehow not a common sight for this day and age. Charming that she can retain the innocence of a sheltered upbringing, but it won't last long, not here in the city.

Jonas is forty-five. He was a successful researcher, now head of the Norwegian Research Council project group. Now he is sitting in the bar of his favourite haunt, taking a surreptitious drink after work, and mulling over his precarious life. He has agreed to meet Joe, his long time and close friend, who has been striving over an application for something he feels is crucial to Norway's future. They never really have time to talk these days. They have things to discuss, some papers to exchange. Joe still likes paper.

They all come to discuss things with Jonas. For some reason his friends see him a paragon of stability, a pillar of strength. Jonas hardly feels like a Hercules or Goliath. Certainly his thinning hair is not the source of any might.

Jonas Lindgren was hired by the council because he was considered to be an efficient and creative manager, with an talent for team building and getting things done. At least, that's what they said at the time. That's what you get for being an eco-scientist. He is also a doer.

He always was the one who sorted things out, even as a child. He is the strong silent type, as they say: quiet but supportive. He would bolster his mother's doubts and resist his father's belligerence. It is an attribute that people seem to value; they come to him for advice and even just to be with him. He has often been told that he projects a kind of calm that other's find comforting, but he has never understood it himself. No one who understood the turmoil that he suppresses could ever say such a thing. Sometimes he feels like a priest. No, that was Joseph's calling.

Jonas has had a few girlfriends, though none of them ever seemed to measure up to that first experience until Kaja. Women seemed two dimensional to him after that first experience and he kept them at arm's length. His wife, Kaja, was a surprise. She was no facsimile of his earlier lovers, but she shared many of the usual traits that he is unfortunately and fatefully attracted to. Perhaps it is the control-freak discipline of his personality that draws him to women that he absolutely cannot have any control over. Women with troubled or difficult demeanours seem to flock to him and he falls for them again and again.

Jonas eventually left his wife for seeing other men. She cared for him, but more like a faithful dog than as a lover. So he bought a dog to keep him company

for a while. Then the dog left him. It ran off somewhere and was never seen again. He imagines it dognapped and enslaved in an east European brothel, or perhaps in the deep freeze of a Chinese restaurant. No. It isn't really funny.

Jonas shakes himself out of his dreaming and sips at his beer. The little pub has a nice bar with a high ceiling and huge pieces of art on the walls. He used to come here with the rest of the crew of his little company, but bit by bit he has stopped asking them and has come here to escape. It is important to carve a place for oneself in this world of increasingly pervasive noise. If not a silence then a freedom from the obligation to communicate. It is a restful place but an odd place, he thinks, full of local people from every walk of life. It has a good buzz—a background of white noise that, in spite of the chatter, is so unspecific that it is restful. He often turns off his mobile when he gets here or at least pretends not to notice if someone channels him a message.

A tall black man in threadbare jeans and a scruffy sweater enters the bar and edges his way towards him. Jonas's friend places a salutary hand on his shoulder.

"Joseph! How are you?" he says turning to greet the tall figure, shaking his hand. "I've been saving you a place." He moves a bag from the bar stool next to him. "What are you having?"

"Good to see you. Jonas. You look tired though, man. They been workin' you too hard?"

"You read me like a book, sir."

"Hah. What book? Not the Bible, for sure. Maybe a tabloid magazine or something." He laughs. "I'll have a light beer. It looks like I probably can't stay long. I'm on duty at the youth centre, last minute notice." He hands Jonas a folder of papers. "This is for you."

Jonas smiles and gestures with his upturned hand to Joseph's clothing. "Ok. You look different. I don't think I have ever seen you in jeans before."

Joseph laughs. "Do you like them? I have always wanted to own a pair of jeans. Call it my treat to myself. I am in the mood for a little decadence."

"It's very decadent."

"A little symbol of western capitalism, manufactured in the heart of the communist far east."

Jonas gestures to the girl at the bar and gets him a beer.

"So you're still involved in the youth centre?"

Joseph nods. "Not as much as these last years. It's time for me to move on, but yes, I still play a part. Take watches. You know. It's good to be around the kids. It keeps them away from the river."

"You mean away from drugs?"

"Right."

Jonas shifts his eyebrows. "I'd almost forgotten about that kind of thing. You know I live such a isolated existence these days. I can't remember the last time I

actually walked along the river, or was offered dope.” He smiles. “I should get out more.”

“Good to hear you say that,” his friend chimes. “You might not realize it, but other people have things call lives. If you don’t have one you’re missing out.” He laughs and pats Jonas on the arm amicably. “So anyway, what do you think?” He gestures to his jeans.

Jonas smiles quizzically. “I like it. A new style. What came over you?”

“You mean apart from a little extra money? Ah. . .here we are. . .” His beer arrives and he pulls it from the bar and says, “Skål Jonas!”.

“Skål!”, Jonas chimes, lifting his glass, and they drink to their meeting.

“Ah that’s good, man,” Joe says appreciatively. “Lots of things have been coming over me lately. I have been thinking a lot about our project with the schools, talking to the other countries participatin’. You know. It’s good.”

“Good?”

“It’s good to get out for me too. I’ve been doing more of it lately. Should have started a long time ago.”

Jonas’s eyes narrow with curiosity. It seems like an unusual thing for his friend to say. Joseph has been becoming a de facto priest for the Catholic church for as long as he can remember. Indeed, Jonas’s scepticism for all kinds of religion was what made them friends to begin with. That and the similarity in their names.

“Looking for a change?”

“Of course. Things have to change.”

“Change is healthy.”

“Change is the world at work, my friend. Everything changes: seasons, birds, bees, morals, hairstyles. . .” He smiles. “You have to let things grow. You let the young plant the seeds and then you trust that the universe will unfold as it should. But we older ones can take a while to reflect on what is important.”

“What is that?” Jonas says jokingly. “Tell me, I really wish I knew.”

“A pair of jeans perhaps?”

They laugh.

“Seriously, Jonas. I am looking forward to the new project. I think I can do more there. I am tired of fighting fires in these youth centres. I want to go to the source.” He taps the folder of papers.

Jonas conceals his surprise with no more than a wrinkle of an eyebrow. This is not the Joe he knew in college. That one had learned that you just don’t ask too many questions and you follow the so-called Good Book, or its hypocritical soothsayers.

“I thought you were happy doing what you were doing.”

“Mmmm,” he sounds, gulping at his beer. “Well.”

Jonas snorts, waiting for his completion. This is typical of Joe to say something provocative.

"You can reach – well, let's say, a dicey plateau of contentment, or you can achieve blissful oblivion or denial. No, man. No sense in trying to hide from the truth."

"Joe the heretic!"

"I'm quoting you, Jonas!"

"Oh." He grins.

"It's a random walk. Open ourselves up to the truth of our suffering. It's what life is about. The struggle. It's not the arriving, but the getting there."

Jonas grunts.

"You know it, Jonas. I think you have always understood it. But it has taken me longer to see that you were right."

This is a new Joe, for certain.

Quoting me at me? Did I make such an impression?

"Religion's just an outmoded form of politics, anyway", Jonas would grumble. "A way of using fear to control people because you don't have a decent system of law and order. How easy to preach true morality and have it enforced on penalty of an eternity of suffering."

Joe laughed, "You know what they are calling the Christians now? Ringbearers. You know the rings they wear now to show that they are saving their virtue for marriage?"

"All right. Actually, I heard that there was a development in the project, a sudden interest from the Americans? I haven't really had time to follow things. I have been busy with the Fulbright stuff. It was one of the contacts there that leaked it to me."

"That's right. You wouldn't have thought it would you? I guess they are coming around to the idea that this is the only way that they are going to fight crime in the long term. Scrub 'zero tolerance', this is deeper again. Trouble is, they want to own it. But they want to buy us out. I'm not sure about it."

It seems like a flash of good news to him, but his alarm bells are ringing. The noble initiative was a Norwegian idea, from the Peace Institute, but that is no guarantee that it would catch on elsewhere. Every country is the same though: rising petty crime, drug abuse, anti-social tendencies. That was why he pushed the funding of this project. There is no respect for the power of education anymore, except perhaps amongst a rich elite who already have one. People want everything on the cheap now.

So why not perform a little attitude adjustment directly at lower school level, teach kids manners and consideration again, like they used to?

"Is the interest corporate or governmental?" he asks. "Or is it Ringbearers?"

Joseph smile. "What's the difference?"

"Government can have some controls. If companies are involved, they will use this as an opportunity for targeted advertising. If the church is involved, they could use it for indoctrination."

"Church is already involved, Jonas. Well, we've made mistakes in the past. That's a long story. Innocent mistakes."

"Innocence." He whistles playfully.

He shrugs and swallows some ale.

Jonas recalls the incident. Businesses saw it as an opportunity to use market forces to change minds about basic attitudes. But, they also wanted to profit from the results, so marketing departments dreamt up campaigns that would make the company look good and altruistic. Unfortunately, the marketeers were not that savvy; the cogs turned, and before they knew what had happened, the thing had taken on a mind of its own. They were churning out corporate advertising, trying to sell their products to kids, rather than trying to teach them basic manners. They sort of lost the reins.

"Well. Par for the course. Yee-hah, Doctor Frankenstein. Anyway, I think it's great. The project has gained some international support now. The French have shown interest in it. It seems that governments are finally understanding the need for education for everyone. There is also growing interest in Asia and the far East."

"All true. It might actually make a difference. So, did you see our write-up in the paper? They speak well of our achievements here in Oslo."

"No, which paper?"

"Le Monde."

"Not my grazing grounds, I'm afraid."

"I heard that the custodians of the oil fund were pressured by the industrialized nations to put the project into action."

"What do you mean?"

"I mean the government here. Someone had to come up with the money."

"Well that was me," Jonas quips. "Though it's true that we did get a bonus pot for that project. I haven't heard anything about the reasons. I've been a bit too tied up to find out."

Joe nods. "You look tired, Jonas."

"No kidding."

"What's up? Something with Kaja?"

Jonas takes the name like a shot across his bow. He does not want to enter into a discussion about his private life just now. Joseph will delve if he is given the chance. He flounders slightly and steers the conversation back. "You know, I was talking to this kid the other day. He has just started a masters at the University here. He actually told me that he felt school was a waste of time."

"Is this so unusual? I mean kids say that all the time, right?"

“Well, more than that. He said that no one had ever demanded anything of him – never stretched him – not even once throughout his entire career. Don’t you think it is a little scary?”

“You are asking someone from Africa about how scary a lack of education is?”

“I think someone predicted something like this in about 2000. I mean, that the world has been getting dumber for some time. They claimed that it is part of the convenience society. There was some research done. I forget where. In the end we are so lazy that we are helpless. It’s one of the Domsday scenarios.”

Joseph raised his glass. “And the great wheel keeps on turning. I think that’s a cue for a drink. Here’s to our programme!”

They drink.

“By the way,” Jonas recalls. “Do you remember a Professor Egeland? He taught some of the early science courses?”

“Uh huh.”

“He just quit the university after thirty years to become a writer.”

“Good for him.”

“No, he is very bitter about it. Disillusioned by the Department of Education and its budget-rent-a-prof attitude to education. He told me that there is no sense in banging your head against the wall, when all they want is cheap feel-good recipes that they can follow without question.”

“I . . .”

“Jonas Lindgren! Is that you?!” Something punches him amicably on the arm. A short stocky man with a fat face appears beside him, closer than Jonas would prefer. “Leif Erik Larsen. We met at the conference on ecological development last April?”

Jonas glances helplessly at Joseph. “How do you do.” He shakes his hand. “Do you come here often?”

“No. not really. You know I have been trying to contact you for several days. You are a hard man to reach.”

“Uh, yes. I am very busy.” With everything except my job, he thinks.

“Well, this is a lucky coincidence. I don’t mean to interrupt you gents.”

“Well, I . . .”

“I won’t take up much of your time. This is important and I have been calling your number for a while.”

“I’m not very well prepared. It might be better if you called me tomorrow.”

“Oh this won’t take a moment.”

Jonas squirms, looking to Joe for backup, but he is looking restless.

“Look, I have to go, Jonas,” Joe says. “Let’s do this again soon.”

“Eh . . . Joe. Look. Never mind. All right. Sorry about this.”

“No, really. I should go anyway.”

The man looks modestly apologetic. "Look, I don't mean to intrude or break anything up here. . ."

"I have to go anyway. Let me know what you think, Jonas." He gestures to the papers he brought.

Joseph leaves.

"So Mr. Lindgren, you might remember, I am from the ministry of foreign affairs. You know that we've been studying the famine in Eastern Africa. We are hoping that you will fund a study that will help our budget commitment to the famine relief."

Jonas frowns. "Well, you know the budget has been finalized now and the funding assignments have pretty much already been decided."

"Well, we are hoping that you will make an exception in this crisis."

It is true, he knows: this is the first major famine in years. The newspapers have been offering their usual stew of inflamed hearsay, hammered to the point of a double edged sword. Pleading eyes and desperate faces, chosen with editorial care, adorn the covers of newspapers and magazines to maximize the world's guilt for allowing this natural disaster to occur.

"Other nations are making statements of support, and long term commitments to address the climate issues. We feel we should do the same."

"But surely that is not a matter for a research council?"

"The ministry feels it is: it would send a good signal to be seen to be investing in long term solutions, rather than just direct aid. You can't just put a plaster on the future!"

Nice slogan, but guilt is not an emotion that Jonas has ever felt compelled to exhibit. The eyes of Europe are on this disaster and the cries for help and being answered with nominal budget reallocations.

"I think my job is to fund progress not famine relief."

This pipsqueak civil servant is asking him to give up his hard won pittance for research to cover another budget with more political feel-good floss? The sums of money he has at his disposition are hardly significant for something like this.

"But you know what they say – no more than four meals from anarchy."

"Or four extra meals to libertarianism."

He sends him an uncomprehending stare.

"I feel confident that we can work out an arrangement. This will mean a lot to Norway's image as a global player. It will make us practically an economic superpower, compared to other countries."

Jonas hides his reaction by emptying his glass of beer.

"So I'll come by at the end of the week to make the arrangements then." It was not a question.

“Well, I am going to be pretty busy with the details of the collaborative research conference. And the Research Open Day is coming up with the Colleges and Universities.”

“We have an obligation to help. I know you’ll come around.”

Something in his tone tells Jonas that the matter has already been decided. Now he will leave and everything will be as he has implied. Jonas feels the relief of a drowning man who knows that it is time to accept his fate.

“I suppose we can look at the budgets again.”

Why couldn’t Joe have stayed put? Christ. He came here to get away from it all. Oslo is too small, he thinks.

What is the point of a pub if you can’t escape from your day job? And how do you get away from the ball and chain that hangs on your wrist? People can’t blow smoke in each others’ faces anymore, but at least they can zone out and pretend to be talking to someone else if they don’t like their company. We’re all sitting here not sure whether we want to meet each other or hide from each other. Everyone has their own story.

So what is mine?

And look at the loser on the end of the long bar. Who is that sad old fuck? He sits in the bar every night and never says a word, drinking his beer, all by himself. Then he staggers home drunk to whatever awaits him. Is it an unhappy home? Or maybe no home at all?

*

Jonas feels a rhythmical pulsing in the arm of his sweater. Obviously he forgot to switch off his mobile today. He is using his bracelet watch today as his organizer. He glances briefly at it. It’s flashing him an E-mail. He ought to ignore it but, like most people, he can’t quite free himself from its charms. There is a message from John, the English intern at the office. They talked about going to the gym together, but Jonas feigned other plans.

He leaves the bar and steps out into the wintery darkness. The time is about 20:00, but you can never quite tell in January. With only a few hours of daylight, and the cloud-cover to provide a roof for the city’s electrical lighting, it is difficult to tell one time from another. He trudges up the narrow street looking as he always does at the buildings along the way: no two of them alike, a variety of architectural styles from the last century that pepper Oslo with the good the bad and the ugly. Cars are parked at every place of both sides of the road of this back street. He squeezes through a gap, climbing over the mound of cleared snow to cross the street where he can get off the more populated main street of Grünerløkka.

Jonas pauses. Snow is falling as he trudges methodically up the slight incline by the old brewery. It is much milder suddenly and the calm that only accompa-

nies falling snow seems to envelop the street. A slight rumble glides past him—a car. He stops to admire its grace in this quiet street. How paradoxical that the archetypal opposite of nature, the car, could move so silently through it, almost respectfully sliding through the flakes with only the slightest crackle from the studded tires. It is a beautiful sight. A silver bullet moving in slow motion through nature's song of peace.

He continues his meager climb up to the top of the hill, glancing down at the waterfall as he walks on by. It has frozen over in the last day or two. The weather is getting stranger by the year, it seems. Warm. Cold. Warm. Cold. Snow. Rain. Sun. Gone are the days when one knew roughly when winter would start.

Back in the 1950s, John Von Neumann dreamed that we would be able to control the weather, using computers to make accurate predictions, but even he probably realized that there was only a slim chance of being able to describe it accurately enough. Managing it is something else altogether; for that you would need a machine at least as complicated as nature itself, in which case it would just be a storm of its own.

Jonas stops and looks around. Behind him, a few feet away, tree bark shatters into dust, leaving a flaky hole in the side of the old tree. At first he looks away, not realizing what has happened. Then, too incredulous to believe it, he simply stands and stares.

His mobile rings. He taps the control on his watch. "Hello?"

"Jonas, it's me. Can I come over?"

It's Kaja.

"Not really, I'm not home." He moves closer to the tree to look at the place where the shot struck it.

"I need to talk to you," she says. She sounds miserable, but that is normal; it does not necessarily mean that she is. She is used to getting her way, by indulging her emotions at any cost to those around her.

He sighs. "I'll call you when I get home," he lies. "I'm kind of busy right now."

He hangs up. The mobile rings again. Impatiently, "Yes?"

This time there is no voice, just a few moments of silence and the connection is broken. His mobile signals that a file has been uploaded, but the information about the file is empty. Then the mobile screen goes dark and starts the reboot.

"What the..?" For a moment there is a temptation to destroy the peaceful falling of the snowflakes. It is a long time since his mobile actually crashed. But he is tired and just stuffs the little device into his pocket.

21

They drive Preeta and her small suitcase, from the airport, to a spacious, if sterile, flat near the busy centre of an autumnal Oslo. They tell her that it is close to the central police headquarters and to shops and services—to where she will be working. It is close to Little Asia, to familiar food and familiar, cosmopolitan diversity.

They deposit her in a room. The room is warm and dry as a bone. There is something cardboard about it. It is too perfect, too new, too dry, too lifeless. She is in a foreign land. She feels this now, outside the familiar cocoon of Asia. It is almost as though she never left the airport. It has a more immediate sense of dislocation than the VR. She cannot deny its reality, nor adjust its parameters. She is powerless.

They give her a key and a new mobile and tell her not to use the old one, because you never know what someone might have done to such an accessible electronic collar. These days, it is so easy to be followed and traced to source. You don't want your enemies to be able to track you down without even lifting a finger; you don't want to fly a flag to show them how to find you.

She is now a floating soul, serving time in a purgatory of greedy gods: gods who are bartering for the bounty of her. The criss-cross lines of planetary cause and effect have intertwined and woven their skein into a noose to hang her by. She must be so careful, so careful. This egg-shell trail is not leading to any Wizard of Oz. No one, at its end is going to fix her wooden heart.

They tell her that she may feel safe here. She will be looked-after, and her mobile has a panic-button that she can press for emergency assistance. In a world of transnational power-play, you never quite know where you are, or whom you might trust. But you know who your friends are, don't you; I mean, you trust us, right? We already met in our own Virtual Paradise. We wandered into that place of our own making, that we agreed on, at the same time and place. We made contact with tentative feelers and suggestive expressions, gradually building the confidence to talk about our common interests and fears. Isn't that proof enough that we are soul-mates? That we needed each other? That we have something to offer one another?

They tell her that she will be working with Interpol and that her knowledge is valuable to many people: too valuable for her to remain in Asia, in the hands of the federated mafia. She wants to know if she can contact people back in

Kuala Lumpur. She is worried about them, if they will be all right. They say that it would not be a good idea. It is a dangerous time, a time to keep one's head down and to survive. No one is certain of whom they can trust, or who is pulling the strings. They tell her that governments are involved, that the forces of international law and order are now fighting for their own independence against the very governments that command them. Who is actually commanding whom?

*

Questions and more questions; speech transformed into a more material presence, from the whispers of virtual chatter. Conversation reveals odorous humans, not pristine simulations, lurking behind different skins.

She has arrived in a place that she was never expecting to visit; it seems to greet her with an incommensurate enthusiasm. Should she be pleased or disturbed? Come into our parlour. . .

At first it is frightening, in spite of her resolve to show no fear. She still feels the presence of crumpled paper between her legs, the scrapes and bruises of physical mishandling. She balks at the immediacy of this interrogatory welcome.

"I cannot talk like this," she says, as Bishop tries to communicate. "It's too . . ."

Too much, too soon.

Bishop nods.

"Let's meet in the VR."

"I understand," he says. "We'll do that. Meet me here." He flashes her an address. She receives it on her new arm bracelet.

Thus they go, each to their separate, over-dry rooms; they don their mobile accessories and they enter the game, each at their own locations, and seek one another out, as they have done many times before. Dial up the directory of places and times, of levels and scores and select a small, private test program. The developers have set this aside for themselves, for them to talk and discuss. This is not that place, but another place like it.

Preeta checks out the address before simply walking into it. Trust is not easily won, especially not hers. A lifetime of necessary caution has seen to that. Even if she had not avoided physical intimidation by fleeing half way across the planet, her mind could still be at risk. They can still steal her freedom by playing the game of the game: by subtle brainwashing, drawn out stealthily over time. This is a new kind of attack and intimidation that is loose in the world.

She takes the plunge into the half-world of the game. The meeting place they have chosen is a chat room rather than an action board. It presents a futuristic office block, with furniture in the form of twentieth century computer-hardware components.

She materializes slowly, as is the custom in busy areas of the game. It is like walking around a gigantic printed circuit board,; resistor sofas and integrated circuit tables. This is the game developers' idea of a fun place to work.

The ghosted images of other avatars occupy the space, moving around as they would have in the game developers' real workplace. She uses a private channel as they always did, so the other shapes remain mere shadows of people. The others are simply there for company, for the magic of it.

Although this is not their usual meeting place, it is an adequate facsimile of it. She should not show herself in that original for the time being, just in case someone is monitoring the area. Someone from the inside. The authenticity of it shows that Bishop knows of the place where she and her contact have been meeting and talking. She has not described, to anyone else, which of the many places the developers have at their disposal for discussing the development of the game. It is a confidence building gesture.

Preeta draws confidence from the familiar shapes; she feels now that she is talking to someone with privileged knowledge of the consortium resources, if nothing else. She has not been lured into an obvious trap. If this is a deception, then these people are very clever.

"You should not use the old identity any more, just in case someone is monitoring us. Someone who shouldn't be," Bishop told her.

"Just once," she replied. "Just one more time, to find out how my colleagues are getting on at home." When they find that she is gone, someone else will surely be a new target. She should try to lure them away, to protect her co-workers.

"We'll talk about that later," he says. "Not now." It is tempting to simply break away now, to seek out her colleagues. She resists.

She has come here because it seems to be far away from the arm-twisting intimidation of the Russian mobsters and their Asian side-kicks. Here she has a possible future, one that is closer than she could have imagined to her dream of a life of freedom. The aim? To get through this introduction and find her feet.

So close to something so coveted, she responds to the sudden impatience to reach for the previously unattainable. Concentrate, Preeta. All the years of studying, on your own, will pay off, if you only concentrate and do your job.

They greet each other as they always have done in the VR.

"Are you still there?" she asks.

"Where secrets were kept and people wept," he replies.

What an oddly contrived thing to say, but why should she care? That is it. She is in the hands of the right people. If she has been tricked, it is a far more elaborate ploy than a simple hijack in the back of a van.

They talk about the game and about her work, about how the diagnostic traces that their software in Kuala Lumpur has been able to perform have seen a pattern

of behaviour in the game, the same pattern that she has been following for some time, the same pattern that they have been discussing.

"I thought that you were on the inside as a developer," she tells him.

"In a sense, we are. You have been talking to our team, not just to one person."

"I thought so. You have a whole team working on this."

Bishop's VR representation nods. "Here in Norway, we're required to investigate any software that is as pervasive as this gaming software is. If any software company wants to sell its game services in Norway, they have to accept our laws and procedures. Society is still quite tightly regulated here. It is one of the advantages we have in this investigation. One of the reasons why you are here and not in the U.S.."

"But you have access to the code? Corporate secrets."

"Yes. We have access because one of the game consortium's key partners is a big gaming company that is based here in Oslo. As long as they are here and follow our rules, we use the opportunity to use their expertise in analysing the game. The consortium has to agree to it. This is an important market.

"Our contacts in Interpol apply pressure too, in the United States to make that happen. This is really a huge investigation that was prompted by the F.B.I. themselves. They have been watching the corruption of government for some time. So the game consortium really doesn't have any choice about submitting to these investigations."

"But are they not trying to conceal the secret features? The bending content? In Malaysia have all had to sign Non-Disclosure Agreements. They say that, if we reveal any of the details of the subliminal content we will be prosecuted to the full extent of the law. Which means the full extent of corruption."

"It must be frightening."

She nods.

"Have you never thought of getting out of this?"

She laughs. "All the time."

"Well, perhaps we can help you. We have some funds for our core activities. That's how we brought you here. It can't be all that difficult to convince someone to give you a long term job."

They watch for a moment, observing the passing ghosts, banding together in clusters. They are all here, in one place, but not really together: each group in their bubble, their own private channel. So why do they need the illusion of seeing one another, of pretending to be together when they simply cut each other out? Is it security? Is it mandatory policy to prevent overlapping conversations? Are they lonely? Do they know it?

"I thought I was doing the right thing. If western governments want to manipulate their peoples I don't care. Our company needs to survive. We are used to this kind of thing in our business. As long as it is bringing in earnings, then

I am doing the right thing. I mean, this kind of corruption or manipulation or whatever you want to call it, it has been happening throughout history one way of the other, hasn't it?"

"Yes it has," Bishop says, impressed by her. "So you reported this problem to your boss and he wasn't interested? Wouldn't that be a serious problem for your company?"

She scowls. "My boss is an idiot. He reminds me of my stupid brothers, all bullying and mouth and no brain."

Her visual presence shows no signs of agitation in the VR. It is one of those little paradoxes with the VR, one of the causative factors of the frequent outbursts of mobile rage amongst kids who spend their time in this body-language inhibited world.

"Bosses can be like that I suppose."

"Not bosses. Men. Stupid idiotic men. Ninety percent ego and attitude and ten percent intellect, if you're lucky!"

Bishop laughs. "I'm sorry to hear that."

"Oh! I'm sorry," she realizes. "I didn't mean to be rude. But you can't imagine what it is like to grow up in a family like mine."

"Trust me Preeta, I have been working with the police force for twenty years. I know what men are like. I would like to be able to disagree with you, but I think your characterization is accurate for a large number of men. Especially young men."

She nods. "Well. It happens all over the world all the time, so I wasn't worried about that. I was just trying to do what was right for my job. I've been trying to save to come to Europe. To work here."

"Now you are here. Or not." He laughs at the irony of travelling half way around the planet only to be back in the same simulated place, in a parallel universe. "When you have learned to trust us, you can carry on working and help us at the same time."

"Do you have any family that you want to contact?"

"Just my colleagues."

"We'll do that soon. When you have told me about the incident."

I was walking down an allée. It was dark and I was joining a group, in my head. I was voting for my government, voting for my self-esteem. I was running from my daemons and flying towards a bright light, where the future was being held hostage by a band of men. I was tired, I was dreaming and my dream was shattered by a screeching of tyres and a hand against my thigh. . .

Bishop cannot see her trauma, but his sixth sense can sense it.

"I have an idea," he says. "We should change our appearances now – to match our real ones. It will make it easier for us."

She nods. It will be strange, like ripping the mask off a knight in shining armour and finding the frog inside.

"I want to show you something," Bishop says.

He ties their movements together and dials through the locations, back in the real-world sims, the public spaces. They melt from one location into another.

"Here is a place I like to come and watch," he says.

There are people here. Hundreds of people. It is a shopping mall. They are reading the ads, hearing the hymns, buying the products, wearing the clothes. They are displaying the logos and flying the corporate flags. Each body is a hard-hitting tattoo, a round of of symbolic gunfire.

"Especially after you and I first talked."

They see the people in their groups, but they are not together. They are marked as ghosts in pairs and in small private groups, just as they are everywhere.

"This is something you will recognize."

Instantly their picture is transformed, as if they were suddenly observing a camera image in infra-red, or a computer enhanced image, nuclear magnetic resonance—and they are able to see the game's projected bindings, the attractive forces that are applied through the rules of the game to incite allegiance to the greatest logos of them all. It is like having the veil of ignorance lifted from one's eyes, and Preeta knows immediately that this is her doing. She has made this possible.

"This is based on what you told me," he says. "I got one of our programmers to implement the idea you explained to me."

She allows herself to feel a little pride. In the stream of coloured ribbons, they can see the lines that bind the spectres of this public place in a way that no ordinary participant could fathom; they can see all manner of things: intentions, unexpected relationships, snaking patterns of cause and effect, the beginnings of prediction, and the very glimpses of the future that led her to the inevitable conclusion: that the shallow manipulations of the game were far too simplistic to thwart this kind of complexity. The game was a failure to its hopeful designers.

In Kuala Lumpur, she saw all of that in her head, with a little help from the computer. But here it is, now, all laid out in fantastic Technicolor, for everyone to see. No one can fail to see it now. Will they hang her for passing on company secrets? No. No sense in thinking like that. The idea was hers. No one asked her to come up with it. It was one of her private pleasures, to pass the boredom of her real job. There was no ethical breach in passing it onto the mystery X, even if there was a little bragging involved.

She smiles to herself, behind the privacy of her VR headset and her representation smiles with her, in full public view. She has always had the knack of being

a step ahead, but without giving away her full hand.. *And that sort of brings us up the time you freaked out*, she thinks. *The time you ran*,

“All right,” she says, after a long pause. “I trust you.”

“Good.” He seems to pause in thought. “So then. Tell me everything that has happened.”

*

She looks out of her dry, cardboard box onto the shiny black world beyond. No one told her that it would be quite this cold and wet! It is not so much the temperature, which hovers around zero, as the festering dampness, which triggers convulsions of shivering in her. There are traces of snow lingering outside. She has not seen snow for years.

Her first impulse on arriving here, on awakening to a new day, was to flee. How could they possibly bring her to this place? It is like a new trap all over again. Is this what life is about? Falling from old trap into new trap?

After these few days, she is growing vaguely accustomed to the strange blue-grey light, of a world that seems to be locked in a perpetual sunrise or dawn. This city, Oslo, seems like a chilly, frozen monument, lifeless in its frigid greys. There is not a hint of the real life here to her eye; every building meets the next, more like soldiers in formation than a family or clique of friends. And this persistent rain removes any lingering colour from the scene, except for the dark shades in a grey sky. It is solid and sturdy, but it is . . . alien.

Sleeping with a heavy rug of feathers on top of her has also been a new experience. Duvé. Dyne. How can anyone sleep with such a weight on top of them? The alternative is to switch on a heater and lie naked: not a fan to cool her, but a panel oven to warm the room. But then the air becomes so dry that she has woken now several nights, feeling as though she has been dessicated for sale in a supermarket.

No matter, she will adapt.

A plan for her days has been written for her. That's okay. It isn't too demanding. Obviously having brought her here, they would want to get their money's worth. But she also needs some time to think, to process. That time is now, in the waking hours, while her body's clock is still confused by the travel and the darkness. Making kulfi out of icicle pricks. Cinnamon thoughts.

Preeta heads out into the morning, wrapping up in her new clothes and braving the outside temperature. In these early hours, she can feel more anonymous and therefore more comfortable as she skulks around. She knows that her position is being monitored, but that is just fine. The clawing uncertainty of her physical security, leaves her nervous of being alone, but somehow she feels more protected in all of these padded garments. It is like a body armour. With a woolly hat on, they can hardly see who she is.

Scattered diamonds on the dark green grasses glisten in this blue light. It seems like another planet. And they say that soon it will be dark most of the time here soon. Only the falling leaves, leaving small yellow-green paw-prints on the pavements, reveal any sign that life has once been here to grace this planet with colour. Even the colourless people shuffle past without life or vigour, making no eye contact, nor offering any fuel to warm the streets.

Preeta walks through the streets, through the centre of town, paying no attention to which way she is going. If she gets lost, she can jump onto a tram. She just wants to see this place. It is strange and exotic in some places, modern and futuristic in others, and oddly unkempt here and there.

People walk in ones, never twos. They are wired up to their eyeballs and ears. Every orifice is distracted from the reality of the moment by a mobile conversation, piped music played through little earphones, visual news summaries projected onto their fashionable spectacles. Why do they need VR simulations, when they hide so effectively from the world right before their eyes?

Shards of squandered privacy open and infect her with other peoples' affairs.

"I think you should make it fifty. If they go forward with this then. . ."

"Anthony, this is not a game you know. You definitely need to get . . ."

Laughter. "It was just *so* amazing. You have never seen such tits. I mean I thought the lads were going to cream themselves. . .wait a minute, some stupid bitch is in my way. . ."

"Miriam here. I was wondering if you had the figures for January yet?"

At Riverside, there is a tramp with the shell of an old mobile handset. He is pretending to talk to a fictitious mother. There are no electronics in the shell, not even a paper cup and string to carry his voice across the city, but the lure of conformity is a powerful force, stronger than his deadened mind can resist. Not even the humiliation of being caught out in an obvious lie, of having the whole street look and laugh at his expense, is enough to assuage the futile deception.

"Mamma. How are you today? You should keep away from that bottle you know. . ."

How lonely it must be not to own a mobile, to find oneself outside of the walls of society, outside of the welfare net. These people define themselves by their communications. The nasal drawl of the substance abusers rivets her attention.

"Fuuuuck. They took my dog and deaded it. Fucking police took my fucking dog. Spare some change, lady?"

No one is giving. Too many are asking,

She ends up in a street of shops, where trams roll past and the occasional car crackles along. There are more people here; she likes the activity. It seems that there are so few people in this place.

A painted building catches her attention. An old fashioned, 1930's style advertisement for chocolate is painted onto a rare space on the side of a building.

It adds a much wanted splash of warmth to the street. She greets it as she would a friend or a member of kin.

Someone curses and she feels a thud. She hears a laugh as someone pushes her out of the way. She was looking at the advertisement, she lost her awareness of the people around her, of the distracted stampede. The man who bumped into her is talking to someone with his mobile, not watching where he is going either. She does not feel as though it was her fault, but she feels somehow dislocated.

"You lost?" A chubby African woman, black as the night itself, is standing close by. It is difficult to see her with the bright lights of shop windows lighting her from behind.

She shakes her head.

"You look like you're new here. Tourist?"

"Just visiting."

Preeta sees her teeth now, bright and white, contrasting with her dark skin and Negro lips. She seems to be standing in a doorway, waiting for a tram.

"You were looking a bit panicked."

"I'm new here."

The Negro woman laughs warmly. "These white men and women are always in a hurry. They can't wait for a moment to say something. Always stressin, out with the mobile. . . Everything has to be done now. Interrupt anything for the mobile." She laughs again. "It's not like that where I come from."

"Where's that?"

"Oh what do you think?"

"I'm sorry. Africa?"

"Ivory Coast."

Preeta shrugs. "Africa."

"West Africa. We take things easy there. We don't need to hurry all the time. Slow down!" She laughs.

"What are you here for?"

She laughs. "What are you 'in' for?! You make it sound like a prison sentence, girl."

"No, I didn't mean. . ."

She laughs. "Honey, take it easy. I was just laughing. You have to laugh."

You have to laugh. Preeta wishes that she could feel the same way.

"Don't take it all too seriously, child. It's an adventure!"

Preeta smiles at her, genuinely. It is the first smile that she can remember feeling on the inside. The first smile that creases her eyes and cheeks. This woman does not want anything from her. Her warmth is freely given; it is a random act of generosity. In spite of her darkness, she shines with the warmth of a log fire to Preeta, amongst the cold, robotic figures who are streaming to their presumed workplaces.

A tram rolls up, behind her. "This is me."

Preeta lifts her head. Her face must have betrayed disappointment that the meeting is over. The Negro woman seems to take pity on her.

"Listen, honey. Don't take it too seriously."

She steps slowly onto the tram and holds onto a pole. She does not turn and wave good-bye. The encounter is over; it meant nothing to her. She was just being neighbourly, nothing more. She was not looking for friendship, simply interacting with the world, unafraid.

Preeta watches the tram roll away.

She feels a vibration on her wrist. Her mobile has incoming. It is Bishop. She flicks it on.

"Hello?"

"Good morning. Did you sleep well?"

"Better. I'll get used to it."

"I have some news about your friends at home. I can tell you when you come in. We'll be meeting at nine o'clock. Join us at the station then. okay?"

"Okay. I'll be there."

"Everything okay?"

She nods. "I'm just out for a walk. I'll check how to get back. Maybe there is a tram I can catch?"

"Where are you?"

"I'm not sure."

Bishop laughs. "You'll be fine. See you in a while."

22

At the Los Angeles airport terminal, flocks of passengers emerge from their check-in lines in a cross-stream. People pour out of one queue and collide with those from another with notable disregard for one another's predicament. They meet like immiscible liquids, turbulent and unaware of one another.

Attention Mr. Al Arrabi on flight AE457 to London, please contact information immediately. Thank you.

Den fumes at the stupidity of it all. A woman practically walks into him. Her vision is focused on an image behind her glasses, not on where she is going.

Every year now, more and more people are killed in traffic because they were looking elsewhere. People in cars and on foot, each of them believing that their remote activities were more important than their physical well-being. Each of them delegating the responsibility for their welfare to the world around them.

Den sees that billboard again, the same one he saw in San Diego, but running in real time now. He is not aware of any subliminal messages but he knows they are there, and they are telling him he doesn't like this guy much, so maybe he deserved it after all.

This is an airport authority announcement. In the interest of airport security, please maintain control of you bags at all time. Do not accept any items from persons you do not know to carry in your baggage. Please report all suspicious behaviour to law enforcement immediately.

He walks past the short line of passengers, glad to be a business traveller. His belt buzzes once as it registers his check-in, and they tag his suitcase. There are seldom long lines at airports these days, but trunk routes like this deal with hundreds of passengers, and improved technology only makes people arrive later for check-in.

A call comes in on his mobile – actually two. He glances at his silver watch and sees that one is from Celia Waites and the other from a client.

Celia Waites? Damn, he thinks. What does she want? He decides to ignore the call. After all, he is busy checking in for his flight. Celia is okay, but now is not the time to be discussing their little rendezvous last year. He clicks the other and prepares to adjust the volume in his earpiece.

"Hello?"

"Den?"

"Hi Carlos."

"You're leaving today, right?"

"I'm at the airport now."

"Okay great. Just wanted to wish you a pleasant flight, my friend. and say that we are real happy with your work. The reveal date on the product is tomorrow. The Ultima link is real sweet. You all set?"

"I'm set. Glad to hear you're happy. We're already working on the next phase and I expect we'll meet each other again."

"All right, my friend. Have a nice flight."

An ad' comes up on the little screen as he clicks away the message. He should have checked his payment options. Now it will play out without interruption.

"I can't get up." "I can't walk." "It's destroying my life." Many people have their lives disrupted by back pains. If you or a family member are one of

them subscribe now to Painex Plus and get a free sample of Disto-lean—removes stretch marks and cellulite in no time. Thank-you, Krimpol Plus and Distolean!

He shudders physically at the lack of subtlety. They ought to have been able to select a better ad' than this for him. Obviously something is wrong with the system today. Two messages at the same time, and an obviously misdirected advertisement?

Crap, he thinks. Good-bye, America.

It has been an exciting trip, but it will be good to get home. He flows through the airport and falls asleep on the plane.

*

It's dark in the cabin, when Den awakens. His belt vibrator is buzzing with an incoming call. He looks groggily at his watch and sees that the call is from Celia again. He touches the busy response and flips the mobile into sleep mode.

She's a sweet woman and she looks great, but he cannot let this get out of control.

Surfacing involuntarily from the light sleep, he feels stiff and heavy headed, and there is an excruciating pressure on his bladder. No choice but to get up and do something about it.

He looks about him in the business cabin and sees that several of the other passengers are sleeping in their little sarcophagi. He un-buckles his safety belt and lifts himself up into a more vertical position from the seat-bed enclosure.

"Are you all right, sir?" a stewardess asks him.

"Fine," he says, and adds: "Thank you," remembering that he is now on British territory again.

"Can I get you anything?"

"No, thank-you."

His neighbour is missing from bed. He looks back to the toilet cubicle. Three people seem to be waiting in line. Damn. There are other toilets on the plane, surely.

He stretches his aching legs on the soft carpeting, and walks back into the cabin behind, pushing past the curtain and continuing on into economy class. Might as well see how the other half lives.

People are more awake back here in the Morlock's realm. They do not have seats that turn into beds like the privileged class. Den sees passengers sitting, row upon row, in the darkness. Blue faces, lit by the entertainment screens that hang in from of their eyes. Rows of numb faces peer willingly into media captivity, absorbing the programmed material as if enacting a scene in some Orwellian brainwashing farm. So docile, they look, so accepting of what they have been served. It looks like a factory, a warehouse of consumer stock. His trained eye

can see the tell-tale signs of hidden billboards and directed imaging in the movie presentations. A couple of passengers are playing the game.

Den finds the washroom empty. Everyone is busily following the in-flight entertainment. He considers himself fortunate. He relieves himself and looks at his calm visage in the mirror, recalling what it used to be like to travel economy. He does not look as drawn and withered as the factory hens out there. He could sleep some more, but perhaps it is a good time to catch up on a few things.

He walks back up the plane, taking a sparkling water, bottled at low pressure, to freshen up and morphs the bed into a seat, hooks into the console in his sarcophagus and selects the game interface.

It has been a while since he received any kind of message from Mary Cheung and he has been too busy to check in, lately. Now would seem like a good time.

Glancing at her monitor, it seems as though she is using a lot of resources. She is obviously engaged in a part of the game that requires a considerable effort to blend in. He attempts to interface his mobile with the aircraft systems, so that he can access Mary directly, but his attempt fails. So much for in-flight services. That means he will only be able to access some of the lower level parts of the game.

He flicks through the menus, and finds only a handful of scenarios available. They probably don't want any game scenarios on the plane that will agitate passengers. An explosion of game rage would not go down well at thirty thousand feet.

Bollocks. Only five hours left to Londinium.

23

"You wouldn't believe what she said!" Laugh. "It's all in the presentation, they say, so put some make up on. Cover yourself! Ouch, sorry, I almost walked into a little man with his mop here. . ."

"Good morning, Madam. How may we help you today?"

"Just a minute, hon. Ah . . . yes, table for one, by the window. Over there."

"This way, please, madam."

"No, I'll sit over there instead. Sorry darling. Fine. So I said to Marcy. You

have to let me come and show you that it's for real. I mean . . . Good. That's nice. Oh yes, he's a sweet soul, don't you think? You could almost eat him alive! But he was not very supportive . . .and you know she. . . Well, yes. . ."

"If you would like to take a seat here, Madam, someone will be along to take your order in a moment."

Nod. "No, no. You're kidding me! Get out of here! No I don't think I'll be able to meet her. Best just to call me. I'm so busy all alone. But of course I would do anything for her. . ."

"Good morning, how are you?"

Eyes acknowledge, head nods. "Well Saturday . . . no Friday. . .do you think so? That's so sad."

"Can I get you some juice today?"

Hand moves over glass. Head turns away, vaguely saying no. Laughs.

"Then you know, we have to do something about it. We can't let the poor dear go through this alone. Imagine the humiliation! Hah!"

"And how may we help you? Do you want the breakfast buffet? We have a large selection of hot and cold dishes, Bagels, English muffins. Cajun Benedict. . ."

"Oh, you are wicked. Eh, no, wait a sec, hon. Ehm. . . Just bring me a coffee and a bagel with cream cheese. Plain, not strawberry. Decaf. Oh and the cheque. Thank you. So you know what Marcy sees in this fella?"

"You are wicked."

Loud laughter.

"Someone is giving me a dirty look, I'd better keep my voice down, hon. Oh wait! I have a call, just hang on, it could be work.

"Hello? Yes, I'm on my way. Just getting some coffee. Okay. Yes. . .yes. . ."

"All right then, madam. Here's your bagel and decaf. I'll just get you your cheque."

"..yes. No problem. Okay. Bye."

Click.

"Hi hon. Are you still there? Sorry about that. Mmm. The coffee is terrible. Just someone from the office."

"And your cheque, madam."

Nod.

"Yes! Hehe! I know. Never mind. Mmmm. Wait. I have my mouth full. . . Stop it! You'll make me spit out my coffee!"

"That is just awful."

Eating and chewing.

"All right. Yes. Yes. I know. Yes, I know. . ."

Slurp.

"So, darling, will you call me again later? I have to go now. Okay. . ."

"Okay. . . .
"Okay, bye."
Stuff bagel into mouth.
"Are we all done here, Madam?"
"Yes." Mouth too full to answer.
"All righty then. Thank you so much for your patronage, Madam. Hope you have a nice day."
"Ya . . . bye. Keep the change."

24

The sudden realization that the jarring ring entering his ears is not part of his dream, ruptures a soothing fantasia on his life, and an uncomfortable angst explodes into his consciousness. Jonas forces movement into his arm to kill the alarm clock, before realizing that it is not his programmed wakeup call that is assailing him. The mobile handset is on the table beside his bed.

Instinct triumphs over slower faculties; he grabs the device and opens the line.

"Ja?" Croak.

"Jonas? It's me."

"Kaja? Jesus, what time is it?" He tries to see the clock, but he parked a glass of water in front of the display last night.

"Early. I have to take Martin to the doctors. I think he is sick. Everything is going wrong. I just needed to hear your voice."

Fine, he thinks. *I am still on your leash.*

He rolls over onto his side to stop himself falling asleep again and looks at the clock. It is 7:30 but it seems dark. The nights are getting darker quickly now. It's about time he got up anyway.

"What's wrong?"

"I don't know. He's talking about a sore throat and he's got the shivers. Do you think it could be influenza?"

"I don't think the flu usually shows up this early, unless it's from last year. Could be anything."

"But it could be serious."

"Look, practically half the illnesses in the book start like that. It's probably just some virus thing. He'll enjoy being out of school for a couple of days."

"Do you think you could pick him up? I mean take him to the doctor?"

"Are you sure he needs a doctor?"

"He's a child, Jonas!"

He groans. Best not to get into an argument this early. "Well, I don't think I can come over until late this afternoon. I have meetings all morning."

"Jonas, you spend half the day walking around the city. You don't need to be in your office."

"Kaja. . ."

"He's your son, Jonas."

He lets his head fall into the pillow and suppresses a sigh. "I could pick him up around one. . ."

"But what am I going to to with him? I can't stay at home. I have to work. I have to be where I have to be."

"Uh huh.." Bend and raise the knees. Breath. Oxygenation of key faculties. "Well, take him with you to work."

"How can I do that? He can't sit there in the shop, in a draft, waiting for you."

"What about you mother?"

"You're his dad, Jonas. Why can't you do something for him for once? It isn't as if I ask you to do something very often, is it? If this were one of those bloody robots you send to Mars or whatever you do, you would be over there in flash, but if I ask you to do one little thing you can't."

He closes his eyes, realizing that there is no way out of this now. "All right?"

"What? If you.. what?"

"I said yes. Fine. Take him with you and I'll pick him up as soon as I can. What time are you starting?"

She hesitates. "Eight."

Like hell, he thinks. When were you ever on time? "Well it will probably take me an hour to get there. When does he have to be at the doctor's?"

"I haven't made any appointment."

Of course not. The whole thing is just a bluff, a way of making him jump through hoops. "Fine. Expect me in an hour." He hangs up.

*

Jonas used to face the world with a vigorous thrust and parry. Now he flounders at the thought of leaving his home. Is this what happens to people when they get older? He is far from old—his mid-forties are clinging on to him, but there is something about the protective enclosure of his apartment, with his books and

his music that makes him feel safe and sheltered. As soon as he is through that door, the fear passes and he is fine again, but there is a moment in stepping over the threshold that is getting harder and harder for him to endure. I am turning into a hermit, he thinks. Is this how it happens?

His father, old Arne, turned into a bitter old man. He sees the ripples of cellulite on his stomach, the bulging waistline: the features he mostly remembers and associates with about his father's decline.

His mobile rings. "Hello," he says sharply, not meaning to sound stressed, but not quite pulling it off.

"Hello, Mr. Brekken?"

"That's me," he says, glad for the excuse to delay his departure.

"Hello, this is Katti Møller from the grant office. Do you have a moment?"

So it begins. "Go ahead."

"Well, we have been reviewing the circumstances surrounding the special expense application by a student funded through the research council. I think the case was referred by your office."

"Oh?"

"Yes, a student called Stensrud at Oslo University College. Something to do with robotic environmental studies? She has some special funding to work with an American group I see here."

"Oh yes, there is a Fulbright scholarship connection, working with a group in La Jolla, California."

"I see. Well, I have her file her in front of me and there is a slight problem."

"Yes." Jonas feels a pang of guilt. Sara has some interesting challenges in her project, not the least of which is dealing with the grant office and their merry incompetences. Collaborative grants are not easy to get hold of these days, and when you have them you find that they grant little, but swathe the bearer in a protective cocoon of inaction..

"La Jolla?" She pronounces it wrong, reading the letters with Norwegian sounds, literally.

"It's pronounced La Hoyya," he corrects.

"Really? How strange. Is that Spanish or something?"

"I believe so."

"Well, Mr. Brekken, there is a problem. The Norwegian authorities, following the new E.U. guidelines, have new rules concerning the amount of support that a student can receive in the space of a year when receiving income from another source. There is now a request for funds for a visit to a cabin in the Jotunheimen mountains. What is this? A holiday trip in the middle of her studies? This is very irregular."

"She has fieldwork in Jotunheimen," he says. "It's all above board."

"But our rules don't allow us to make payments for board and lodgings unless the trip is a scientific conference."

"It is certainly a scientific trip."

"We are only authorized to support conference visits."

"We used to be able to decide these things at our own discretion." Jonas feels the blood starting to warm up inside of him. "We have plenty of residual funds, I am pretty sure that there was no problem in taking the residuals from the previous year."

"Well that might be true, but there is another issue. Under the new guidelines from the ministry, we are not allowed to pay something like this. It has to do with the State Ledger. We cannot pay out such a small amount of money. Every payment has to be marked by a government approved accountant. But with their minimum fees, that means paying a fee that is about thirty percent of the value of the payment, in this case. We could have done it earlier on, but the new rules tighten up controls on these small payments. We are no longer allowed to waste money like that. Had it been a scientific conference then we have special exemptions for that."

Jonas grimaces. "Yes, I know about that. Can't you allocate the payment from somewhere else? The Ledger does not have to be involved if we can attach it to come project expense. If we can transfer the amount from a different account, then we can lump the sum together with another payment from the account. Make it into a printing expense or something."

Katti Møller laughs. "If only it were that simple," she says.

It could be. It should be. "Look, we have done this kind of thing before."

"Well, if this student were financed entirely by the research council it would be a different matter. Then we could make an exception, but in the general paragraph about collaborative grants, we have to observe the conditions of the agreement."

"What about European funds?"

"No. The problem there is that the E.U. will not provide support to NASA-related projects. The European Space Agency is a competitor so there is a conflict of interest."

"Well, ask NASA. It must be in their interests. I don't think Sara would go off into the mountains at this time of year unless it was necessary. Perhaps you can get in touch with the group from La Jolla who are over here working."

"I'll have to ask my supervisor."

"Well that would be me, wouldn't it?"

"Sorry, Mr. Brekken, but you are just the research coordinator. You don't have any administrative authority."

"Why doesn't that surprise me? Look, how are these requests coming in?"

“Direct transfer, request for payment from her mobile. It’s on a credit agency, so the bill does not have to be paid for a few weeks, but I have to mark it now for acceptance or refuse it today.”

“I know that she has been trying to contact me,” Jonas thinks aloud. “She is not the kind to ask if it were not absolutely necessary.”

“You know this girl?”

“I am partly responsible for the project. We should have plenty of funds.”

“There are no allocatable funds for travel on her account.”

“That cannot be right,” he mutters in exasperation. “I was at the meeting where the funds were dealt out. I have the receipt that proves that the data were submitted.”

“Well can you send me a copy?”

He flips through the data areas on his mobile and confirms what he already suspected. It simply says ‘SonErikia: unknown data error’.

“Well, normally I could, but something happened to my mobile the other day and it has been acting up. I’ll have to retrieve it from backup. Hopefully I can get it done later today. But you will have to send me a signed request. Voice is not good enough for this kind of request. We are not allowed to record voice mail. I am just getting an error here.”

“Well, send it along. But I am guessing that there is loophole in the conditions on that transfer.”

“So you’re saying that she cannot be paid?”

“Well, not like this. I could refuse the request, then she would have to move the request elsewhere. She could submit a larger amount for the full journey at a later date, then that might exceed the limit of what we are allowed to pay out. Sorry, she says. That’s the government social sector for you.”

Fantastic, he thinks. That’s the government for you, as if that were an acceptable and unavoidable state of affairs. Normally you’re not allowed to spend too much money. Here she is not allowed to spend so little money. There is no way to satisfy the constraints, and he does not want to talk about this now. “Look, I have to go now. Please try to find a solution. I’ll get back to you later today.”

He archives the call with a note and reconsiders the door. He looks around his living room, at his precious things, his comforting domicile and draws a breath for strength. Does he have everything he needs? Can he face the world today? It could be cold out there: perhaps minus five, or worse: plus one degree, with cold damp humidity working its nebulous fingers into every orifice and interface between skin and clothing. He feels tired, worn out. But the fresh air will invigorate him, recharge him. So, he turns to the door resolutely. Okay, here we go.

The mobile rings again. Cannot wait now, he has to leave. He opens the door, steps into the dimly lit hallway and locks it behind him with his mobile and then

with a physical key. A neighbour is coming down the stairwell towards him. Their eyes meet for a second in cold suspicion. The mobile is still ringing. It is a good excuse. He lives next to these people; he is not obliged to talk to them.

He looks away and accepts the incoming.

"Hello. Jonas."

"Jonas, this is Anita." From the office. It's eight o'clock already. He is late. "Sorry to bother you."

"Hi. That's okay."

"We just got a paper letter from the ministry of education. It's in reply to the letter you wrote to the NATO liason in Brussels."

"Ah." He waits for the shock-wave and begins walking down the stairs, holding onto the rail so that he can think as he walks. "Don't tell me. They have hired a hit man to knock me off." He remembers the shot from the other night. What was that?

She laughs. "Well they haven't said as much, but that might be the next step. The letter says that you are not authorized to send this kind of query and that, blahdy blah. You should take a look at it. They want to send someone out here to meet you."

"To meet me?"

"That's what it says."

"Someone from the ministry, or from NATO?"

"Well, I got an E-mail schedule request for a meeting with you, separately, from the ministry. They are asking to see you today. That's why I called."

Jonas reaches the bottom of the dingy stairwell; he bumps into the mailboxes as he passes an elderly neighbour and heads out into the gloomy twilight of the morning.

"I am going to be busy today. . ."

Jonas is painfully aware that the letter he wrote would not be kindly received. It felt necessary to air his grievance nevertheless. Keeping his mouth shut has never been his strong suit.

Dear Brussels,

I am writing to express concern over the procedure currently being used to fund collaboration under the NATO collaborative research grant treaty. In recent times this has started to follow the trend of Fulbright scholarships in directing research projects to political goals rather than more general research issues that benefit a scientific community. This has resulted in a degradation of established long term programmes of research that have gone on for years. Some concern has been expressed here about the viability of future work under this programme if this trend continues. We of the Norwegian Research Council would therefore be grateful for a

clarification of official policy on the assignment of these grants. Yada Yada.

Disillusionment with the reasons for research seems to be a topic for conversation these days. The government has been persuaded that only projects with guaranteed five year returns will be funded, unless they are politically beneficial. It is no longer about scholarships and learning, but about economic growth or arse licking.

At first, Norway was unwilling to fund research that was not directly related to Norwegian industry. Then came pressure to enlarge the blessed Fulbright and NATO scholarships and pure researchers went clammering to get dribs of money from them. That effectively meant that the Americans were deciding the pattern of research for Norwegian Colleges. No money unless you comply with our wishes.

Senator Fulbright, who created the initiative, saw these grants as a cultural initiative. He said something like: "The dangers of war can be significantly reduced by producing generations of leaders who, through experience of educational exchange, will have acquired the ways and means of living together in peace."

Nice idea. Pretty naive.

Maybe he could get one of the grants for Kaja.

"Can you ask them to re-schedule for tomorrow and, if they can't, make it about two this afternoon."

"Okay. Don't forget the meeting with CERN people from Bergen at twelve thirty.."

"How could I?"

"I'll sort it out."

"Thanks. Now I have to get a move on and pick up my kid. He's sick."

"Okay, see you later."

Enough. He puts the mobile handset on hold and stuffs it in his pocket.

He is tired of being a processor of verbal information. Jonas is not so old that he cannot remember when things were simpler and mobiles were only there for occasional use. People still used to look at each other in the street, back then, and talk to each other as though they meant it.

Japan and Scandinavia. That's where it all started. They have a lot to answer for. What other parts of the world are inhabited by people desperate to push others away, afraid of personal contact, and contact-shy to the point of actual panic that they would embrace mobile isolation?

*

He arrives at the City Gate shopping mall, driving off morning anxieties by sheer effort of will, as he always does.

Kaja works in the news-agent's shop/kiosk at the mall entrance to the central train station. It is jammed in, next to a flower shop that spills over into the mall entrance with seasonal flowers in whites and reds, and purples, broadcasting aromas to mingle with wisps of brewing coffee. It opens early in the morning, like the newsagent. Kaja would rather be working at the flower shop; in her spare time she does flower arranging. The morning is a busy time at the station, what with commuters coming and going and everything.

It is strange to see her here, in this setting. Kaja studied genetic programming at the University. She is twelve years his junior. She was smart and motivated, but she existed without direction and without ambition. She had a keen intellect; now she chooses to suppress it.

She could do so much more than this job she has now, Jonas thinks.

Jonas walks through the rotating door of the mall entrance and sees that Kaja is by herself with Martin behind the counter. Here she is, in this life that suits her, pushing lifestyle magazines on the customers and chewing gum at the faceless mass of commuters.

The manager is here too, at the other end of the little shop, setting out magazines. He has seen her before. She looks at him, openly evaluating him. He wonders what she sees. What has Kaja been saying about him?

The magazines scare him. Forget your life! Buy your dreams instead! Read of sex and fantasy, of adventures you will never begin to surpass. Give up the struggle and be content to read about what others might have done. Keep your head down, look after yourself and your closest family and friends. Make no extraneous connections. It is the modern way. It is the mobile way.

Kaja does not see him at once. Then she sees him and breaks an involuntary smile, before recovering her composed annoyance. "You're late," she says.

"Trams," he replies simply. "Can't live with 'em, can't kill 'em."

"You know where the doctor's is?"

"I have the address. I'll find it."

She nods. "I'm done at four. I can come then. Where will you be?"

"At four? At the office."

She nods and stoops to zip up Martin's jacket. "Martin, are you ready? You go with your father now, okay?" She tests his forehead with a hot wodge of fingers. "Still feeling poorly?"

He nods with sulky eyes.

"Okay, baby. See you later." She gives him a quick hug and offers Jonas a simple "Bye."

Dismissed.

Together they step out into the electrical lighting of the morning. The sky is still dark and mounds of blackened snow are melting around them. Martin walks slowly, far away in a child's dream, eyes wandering and inquisitive of the passing commuters.

A woman stands over a smashed mobile. She has slipped on the steps of the subway and has smashed the transmitter into little pieces. It is broken. Gone. Her lifeline is gone; the umbilical cordless broken. She is crying, looking around at the people walking by helplessly, as if woken from a deep hypnosis, thrust suddenly into the jaws of reality, and feeling so utterly alone that she must beg the faceless flock for their attention, for their assistance. They walk past, choosing not to see her.

Martin's child-stare makes a momentary contact with hers, arresting her with sudden compassion, and she feels a transitory fragment of hope. It fades to the realization that, so naked, she is only a child herself, felled before the mercy of a bewildered herd.

He walks past, trying not to look.

*

Kaja.

She had all the structure of a tornado: a whirling maelstrom of flying debris, whipped up in an involuntary frenzy. She was a force of nature then, sending scourges of incisive needles in all directions. Every little pinprick hurt him. But her control was only a threat of chaos; there was nothing considered about it.

Kaja used to call him all the time, just to check on where he was and what he was doing. It came to the point at which he was afraid to do anything, or meet anyone for fear of her explosive reprisals.

Just because you love someone, it doesn't mean you can live with them.

The life in her eyes, the moments of humour. They have not gone away, only been soiled slightly under the detritus of age and disappointment. Kaja just wants someone to rescue her from her own poverty of effort, and from accursed indecision.

His mobile buzzes on his wrist.

She is calling him, only moments after leaving with Martin.

"Yes?"

"Don't forget to get him lunch, and give him a mouth cleaner afterwards."

He terminates the discussion quickly. Martin looks up at him, as if expecting something. Their child is like her, but quieter. Perhaps that will change as he grows. He knows that he will demand his attention.

If truth be known, Jonas is secretly pleased for an opportunity to walk along Karl Johan with his boy. If only this had been a better time, without the threat of tardiness hanging over him. Martin does not really grasp his need for haste.

“So how are you feeling kiddo?”

He shrugs.

“Think you need some medicine?”

He shakes his head emphatically.

“Just want to spend the day with your dad?”

A slower, less certain nod.

Jonas smiles.

I don't want to work today either, he thinks.

They traipse up Karl Johan, along the cobbled promenade under the trees, past the shops and University square buildings, up towards the palace park.

*

Toll the bell of his yolk. Recorded message: arrives in a flurry of acoustic snow. A message from Sara Stensrud, partially corrupted.

I have to get this receiver repaired.

She explains that she is in the Jotunheimen range and that she needs to spend some time there to try to meet the nursemaiding team. There is some kind of problem with her work. The rest of the message is broken off. He knows her only superficially, but he likes her. She is smart and all the things that Kaja could be. Probably, he ought to be attracted to her, but she is too young, too emotionally shallow for his taste. Nevertheless, she is probably worried. He should try to call her. Perhaps this is a good time, while his activities are restricted, while he is prevented from doing much else.

It is almost nine o'clock and they are still barely approaching the old university square. There is no snow here. It has melted along the main street; heating cables dissolve it away almost as soon as it falls. Small mercies. Even the trees drip dry quickly above the path. It makes 'the going quicker and the coming back', as the old ad used to say.

Martin is being difficult, stopping at every shop window to look at things, dawdling behind. Jonas is growing more and more agitated with his own inability to quell frustration. He will probably be late for his first meeting.

For the child, he thinks, that is the only power one exerts: the power to confound the adult world. It is a frustrating life, always in the way and never really being taken seriously.

Stop, start, stop, ready, go.

He stops to wait as Martin looks in the window of a music shop, examining the classic album covers and printed glyphs of dancing notes on ruled staves. This excursion is taking so long that he ought to turn disadvantage into opportunity. It is an opportunity to call Sara back in real-time, in synchrony: with his real voice. Besides, it is about time he spoke to her about her work. He has been neglecting responsibility.

He hits callback and waits for a ring-tone.

The clicking pause of the searching thought ensues. He awaits the ring, looking around at the emptying street and feeling a surge of optimism at the brightening sky. Click, pause Vast machines must be in motion, slumbering mechanisms brought to life by his request; swinging cranes moving huge bars into place, electrical discharges and blistering arrays of relays moving together to build a connection across the span of air and earth, in search of her. The pause lasts too long. It fails to bridge the unknown.

Sorry. The mobile subscriber is currently unavailable. Please try later.

His own mobile responds to its failure by producing an alarm. He pulls out the handset and clicks on the screen. It says: possible virus warning. Seek service diagnostic at first available opportunity.

A possible virus warning. He recalls the other evening. A virus?

Now Martin is playing in a pile of sodden leaves, kicking and bending down to sample the colours and shapes. To Jonas they are a pastiche, a parody of expired hope. To a child they are just a palette of shapes and colours. Everything falls and decays to nothing, to be re-used in a different scheme. Use it as you will.

You can find anything you want in the patterns of fallen leaves.

Time to get to the office.

*

Jonas and Martin take lunch in the Lighthouse café on the university college campus, close to his office building. There is a cheap access point in the café, where they have parked themselves; Jonas uses the opportunity to re-install his mobile from backup.

A group of teenage girls is loitering beyond the window, on the periphery of the college, wrapped up in their winter coats. They should be in school, but it is not uncommon to see kids skulking about in prototypical gangs.

Their mobiles are fashion accessories now, he observes. Skin-tight, black, brushed denim with wires running up the legs from their boots, fitted with chargers; they make effective antennae. Their ear decorations are just a little too large for the ones with short hair. The throat-band collar microphones look good enough. None of this equipment is allowed in schools for tests or exams, of course. It would be trivial for them to cheat. But isn't all of society cheating these days?

The school kids are playing with a hand-held set, probably some kind of VR game. Everyone seems to be playing them lately, since the allegations about the global game consortium. He queries the fascination they hold. Games have never really been his thing. He was always more interested in the so-called 'real' world. How long will it be before Martin wants a mobile?

Next to the girls is an older man, perhaps in his late thirties who is loitering with them. He is wearing a brown leather jacket and black denims. His hair is razor short. He looks eastern European. He looks like a dealer or a pimp. This can hardly be a good thing, Jonas frets. Whatever reason they have for being with him, it cannot be to their advantage.

His mobile finishes its re-installation. It performs a self-test and rings immediately on completion. He looks for a caller I.D. but the screen is blank. Startled, he considers dropping the call, but sheer habit makes him click involuntary acceptance.

"Hello?"

A high pitched, almost comical, foreign voice answers. "Jonas Lindgren?"

"That's right."

"My name is Ducic." He seems to be in a car somewhere. Sounds of rushing, humming, invade the background noise. "Forgive this intrusion."

"What can I do for you?"

"What indeed! I would like to ask you for your assistance. Perhaps we can do something for one another."

Jonas brushes Martin's hair from his eyes as he digs in to a tub of creamed rice. It is easy to be distracted in the lunch time rush. People are crowding into the Lighthouse. "Go ahead."

"I represent an organization that works in security. I have some interest in a project that you know about and would like to talk to you about your work."

"Have you been in touch with our outreach department?" Jonas suggests, absently, following the antics of the kids outside, out of fascination.

"No, I would like to talk to you, in person, if I may."

"Well, I am rather busy, but I have a little time. Our outreach department has excellent resources for discussing . . ."

The voice interrupts him firmly but not impolitely. "It is your personal work that interests me. I understand that you are funding work in the Norwegian Research Council that is connected to covert operations and law enforcement methods in virtual reality games."

Jonas wrinkles his eyebrows. "I'm not sure what you are thinking of. I can't think of . . ."

"My organization is following the developments in the virtual reality game run by the international game consortium. We are particularly interested in technologies for tracing criminal influences. We have found a project that you have been involved with that seems to propose using the game for such covert operations."

"I have no idea what you are talking about, Mr..? What did you say you name was?"

"Ducic."

“Perhaps you are mixing me up with someone else. I cannot think what it is that you have heard. I am certainly not aware of any such project.”

“I understand that you might not want to discuss this over an open channel.”

Martin is struggling to drink his pop from a half litre beer glass, and he loses track of the conversation momentarily.

“Eh. No, this line is fine. There is . . . eh . . .”

“Our search worms have discovered references to a classified project. The title was not well hidden, but we are not aware of its contents. The title is *Game theoretical strategies for agent deployment in virtual landscapes*. S.V. Stensrud et al. Your name is mentioned.”

Jonas suppresses a laugh. “Oh I see. Eh, look, Mr. Ducic, I think you have misunderstood here. . .”

“Oh? How so?”

“The report is not what you think. It is a student project. It has nothing to do with security.”

“That is not how it appears. Of course, there is no document classification for the report, which is curious in itself. Why would one classify a student project unless it was in the interests of security?”

“Uh. I am sure there is a classification, but the document is not available for general viewing yet, so you won’t be able to see it. That is probably a bug in our library pages.”

“And you are telling me that I am wasting my time here?”

“It would seem so, if you are looking for security matters.”

The man sighs grumpily. “My organization is extremely interested in the methods that are apparently being developed for tracking objects and people in the virtual reality. We are willing to pay for access to this information.”

Jonas shakes his head and winks to Martin. “If you want to pay for access to this project then you need to contact the project initiators. We are currently bound by a non-disclosure agreement we long as the commercial potential of the work has not been fully developed. But even so. . .”

“Yes, yes. You are going to tell me that I am wasting my time because this is not what I am looking for.”

“I think so.”

“And yet this is all very suspicious: work on virtual reality in collaboration with government funded institutions known to develop covert technologies. A classified report without so much as a document classification. . .”

“First of all this is not a classified report. But it is not for public viewing yet.”

Ducic laughs. “There is a difference?”

“Yes, of course there is. Secondly, you seem to have the wrong end of the stick about this project. This is a project in *eco-computing*. It has nothing to do with security. It is about control theory.”

“Controlling users’ behaviours in this game?”

“No, no, nothing like that. It is about collaborative systems.”

“Make up your mind, sir. Your cover story is not very consistent.”

“There is not cover story,” Jonas spells out, pointedly. “You have simply been misled by an unfortunate coincidence of words with multiple interpretations.”

“Come Mr. Lindgren. We have been following a variety of developments and there is a clear connection between this project and the virtual reality games. We have paid a lot of money for our searching software and it is very good. It does not make many mistakes. We also know that research is being carried out within the European Economic Area deploying law enforcement into the Net.”

“If there is any connection to the virtual reality games you are thinking of it does not go beyond normal methods of simulation. Virtual landscape models are used in a variety of projects that we support at the research council. And as you rightly say, there is a general European initiative to develop virtual modelling for a variety of applications, but that is not really the work of the research council.”

“What interests me is that this project I refer to is linked to the American government. . .”

“It is a collaborative project with partial American funding” he agrees. “That is probably what you have read.”

“And how exactly does the American funding find its way into a project here in the Norwegian capital?”

“We have a lot of good software people here. We are still part of NATO. Why shouldn’t we be involved? Norway is a major player in. . .”

“Our search software find a very high probability that this project is, in fact, related to the current rumours about the use of the game for spreading the agenda of the United States government. Do you deny this?”

“Excuse me, Mr. Ducic. Are you working for the press?”

“No, no. I am not here to make trouble for you with the media. We are interested in this technology, nothing else.”

Jonas frowns, a deep frown. “It is a special initiative project in collaboration with NASA and the European and Russian space agencies. Norway is a key player because we have skills in this area. I am sure that you could verify that with your search software.”

“Well, if that is true we shall certainly do that. But our own monitoring has shown us that this Stensrud has activities in the VR game that do not entirely fit into your scenario.”

“What kind of activities? How could you know this? What kind of organization is it that you are working for?”

“Covert activities, Mr. Lindgren.”

“No. Don’t be silly.”

“Our own investigators have verified this.”

Jonas flounders. "Perhaps it is about time you told me who you are."

"That is not important for you to know. Only that I represent a very large organization and we want this game tracking technology."

"No, no. You have this all wrong. I think you are barking up the wrong tree here. The work is nothing to do with this kids' game. You see the word 'game', in the title you quoted, does not refer to the virtual reality game, as in these virtual reality games that you seem to be referring to. It refers to method of strategic modelling, used in agent systems. . ."

"Agents. Precisely. We do not have to mince words. Undercover agents inside the game is a topic of great interest. . ."

Jonas shakes his head, his face lined with dismay and displeasure. "No, dammit, you don't understand. An agent is not a secret service agent. it is a computer program. . ."

"Of course, this is the modern technology. Then you have computer programs that behave as agents."

"I think you need to do some more research on this matter. You don't seem to. . ."

"My superiors have asked me to look into this matter and I come to you because you seem to be a man of influence in this project. I could try to go to the Americans, but I think I am more likely to reach my goal through you. I need to secure access to this project."

Jonas finds himself growing impatient. "Look, Mr. Ducic. I really am very busy and this is not a good time for me. I suggest you talk to our outreach department and let them convince you that . . ."

The high pitched voice matches his impatience and seems to ratchet up a level. "I am not going to be put off by a publicity barrier. I am no fool, Mr. Lindgren and I intend to get the details here. If there is a technology that is able to trace criminal activity. . ."

"The technology is designed to allow robot agents to patrol terrain on other worlds." Jonas almost raises his voice now, and Martin looks worriedly at him. "The title you have seen was an early phase of that project research, that used computer simulated terrain models to test out the strategies. That is why it refers to virtual landscapes."

"I understand that you do not want to discuss this on an open channel. perhaps I could join you at the café where you are eating."

"How do you know that I am at a café?"

"I know my job, sir. And I want to know more about this technology."

Jonas checks the caller info. The screen is blank.

"I have someone watching you now."

"You what?"

"I am able to follow your movements and I am insisting on your cooperation."

"All right. You are starting to annoy me, Mr. Ducic, or whatever your name is. I have tried to be polite."

"But not very helpful. I see that you have found our little surveillance program. We have been following you for a couple of days. You might remember that we left a calling card as you were walking home on Tuesday?"

Jonas' eyes widen like sails unfurled to catch the full impact of the wind. "That's it. I am ending this discussion here and I will be forced to report this matter the police."

"That will not help you. I suggest that you do not. It will only complicate our interaction."

"What is it you want?"

"I have told you what we want."

"But you are not being rational. What you are suggesting is simply not real."

Ducic laughs. "What is real anymore?"

"Threats are real, and I do not appreciate them." Martin is staring up at him with a solemn face and sulky, intense eyes.

"We can also contact this Stensrud. We know that he is somewhere in the Norwegian midlands mountain area."

He? Apparently they do not know everything. "How do you know this?"

"That is not important."

"Are you following . . . him too?"

"We would like to take part in this project, so that we may develop the technology for our own, say, law enforcement. We shall do what we must to make you cooperate."

Jonas breaks the call and finds that he is trembling. He sees Martin's worried look, sensing his unease and tries to conceal his fears with a half-successful smile.

What the hell is going on here? How does someone like him get into something like this. Is society falling apart completely?

This is surely what happens when ignorance triumphs over common sense. If people had as much education as they had access to information, they would realize that they were way off base here. He should tell Sara about this, but she seems to be out of range. He must go to the police.

Jonas looks down at his mobile handset, his wristwatch and he feels the presence of his ear piece and throat microphone; he sees these innocent components in a completely new light. It is no longer his friend, his diary, his wallet, his telephone, his personal computer. . . . It is something sinister, something malevolent. A friend has suddenly become his enemy. It sends a shaft of something through him that he cannot describe. Violation. He feels violated. What else do they know about him? How can he feel safe again?

He glances uneasily at Martin's sullen expression and wonders if the man will call back. He said he was watching them. My god.

His gaze strays back outside, through the window. The group of girls, at the college perimeter, are now looking straight at them and seem to wave cheekily to him and to Martin, as one might wave to a small child.

25

Winter is edging towards her. Snow flakes are falling again, more softly now, sprinkled against the darkening backdrop of the sky. Through a sliver of a gap in her bivvy bag, she can still feel a world transformed to ice since this afternoon. She zips up the gap hurriedly and opens the breathing vent, trying to breath slowly through her nose, so as not to fill up the little sanctuary with squandered moisture.

Sara has had to 'dig down' in the sudden snowfall, not literally. It's just an expression. She has unpacked this ultra-light inflatable bivvy bag, something like a small tent, and has crept into it, pulling her small inner-backpack in with her, and leaving the outer shell with the elements. The weather is too bad to travel now; she has to think about survival.

After finding the place where the VeiVeks' transmitter should have been, but wasn't, the weather worsened quickly and she was plunged into cloud and snow, while descending the mounting, back to the path.

The biggest danger at a time like this is that of a whiteout, where sky and ground merge into one featureless bright blaze of inscrutable whiteness. A misty realm of absolute danger. In those conditions a mountaineer cannot tell up from down, slope from flat, hole from firm-footing. One cannot measure speed or distance, except by the sudden surprise impacts of gravity. Without a tracker she would be lost. Normally her mobile would be able to guide her, but in a white-out you cannot tell ground from sky; she could walk over a cliff without knowing it, fall into a hole, or break her leg on something in a heartbeat. One might as well be blind: all black or all white, take your pick. Contrast is survival.

Necessity speaks in such moments: unpack the inflatable survival bag and anchor it to some rocks before they disappeared entirely from view. The wind,

at least, has died down, now away from the summit, and this has allowed her to complete the operation of setting up her shelter in just a few minutes. But she is already cold to the bone.

Now, here inside the warm bag, she has thawed out and is lying in relative comfort while the weather stages its show outside. She is a little hungry, that will get worse as she rests, but she has some pills and some chocolate to keep it under control. She will be able to sleep and then she can spoil herself tomorrow.

She digs out a little lightweight chemical boiler from her inner-backpack and places it at the ready. The snow will make her a decent cup of tea later to replace some of the fluids that she has gasped in expiration across the mountain. And as long as a mobile signal breaks through the weather, Vibe uses the time in the bag to relay her position to cabin and to her team-mates whom she was supposed to be heading towards, and do a little research. Even with a little technological help, it doesn't hurt to follow the mountain rules and tell someone where you are. Probably she wouldn't have made it to the cabin anyway.

She runs a check on her little children. The flimsy robots are relocating, running away from the snow, as they should. Making them resilient is one thing, but the falling snow confuses their sensory apparatus and makes it close to impossible for them to walk. She can still reach their own private, *ad hoc* network of relay chatter from here, and see that, even without their controller, they are managing to group sensibly into small collaborative communities. She smiles at her handiwork, and part of her hopes that the American team is as impressed with it as she is.

She texts some meaningless banter to Bea and gets only a distracted reply. In the half darkness of the translucent bag, she spoils herself by dialling up some music on her mobile. Something classical would normally be her preference to go along with nature, but in this weather she would not be able to hear it. Bass and drums are required now.

After a while, the warming elements in the bag lull her into a stupor and she dozes off.

*

She awakens hours later, in the early morning, feeling calm but stiff. Even through the snow-buried bag, she can see that it is a bright, fine morning, which is good because she really has to crawl the hell out of this thing now to tend to her aching bladder. Time to get up and make her way to the cabin, where the French team is hopefully still waiting for her, where she will rest for a day.

Vibe unfastens the bivvy bag seams and is assaulted by icy-cold air and a visual feast. The morning declares a fantastic transformation, an accomplishment that mountains can deliver. The clouds seem to have self-destructed, moving respectfully aside for a velvet blue sky and warming sunshine.

Perfection on a stick!

She finds boots, in the outer pocket of her bag, and shelter behind a cairn to relieve her suffering and clean herself. With a refreshed outlook, she can see where she is and how far she has to go to make it down to the valley. The path has been subsumed by the light snow cover, but she can still guess the trail. There are no real trails in the mountains anyway. You just find your way, any way you can.

She dusts melting snow off the bivvy bag and deflates it, folding it into a slightly larger package than she removed it from. It will dry out during her walk. She fastens it to the outside of her backpack and gathers her items together, regarding her sack with some trepidation. Her body aches from head to toe this morning and, in spite of some stretching exercises, she doubts her ability to bear the load without complaint.

The bouldery landscape dissolves into a browner valley, far below, where snow fell as rain. It will take her an hour perhaps to make it down to the valley and then several more to get to the cabin. Better to start now. Going down hill with a heavy sack, on slippery rocks, is going to be a nightmare.

She adjusts her mobile accessories and dials up her shortcuts to see if Bea is awake. It is six in the morning, but Bea's mobile is still saying that she is awake. She gets voice-only immediately.

"Bea? Talk to me girl." She can hear music and the voices of a crowd, a party.

"Hey you. Where are you? Still hiding in your bag?" She laughs.

"No. I am officially a butterfly. I'm at the top of mount Doom, looking out on the fairy world of Jotunheimen. I'm cold and I'm hungry, I got my period and I haven't spoken to a living soul for more than a day."

"Poor thing! At least you're safe."

"What's up with you?"

"Still partying. Nachspiel. Getting tired though. I should go home soon. Fella is still convinced he can get his leg over, but he can't even keep his eyes open."

"Anything I should know about?"

"Not."

"Good, I don't want to feel I'm missing out on everything being up here."

"Hey – we are the ones missing out. Actually, I wish I was there with you. The partying is okay but it's not quite the same without my girl!"

"Golly, matey! You talkin' 'bout lill ol' me?"

"Like no other," she acts. "Seriously, when are you coming home?"

"Hmmm. Good question. Looks like I'm going to be here for a while."

"Problems? . . . no . . . get off me jerk!. . . Sorry. Problems?"

"Maybe. Maybe its actually a good thing."

“You mean you can still meet Mr. Universe?”

“Please! Give a girl a break here!”

“Sorry, you just make it so easy to have a little fun.”

“No, that’s not what I meant. It’s just easier to think out here. It’s peaceful, you know. In the city there’s always something in your face, some billboard or a sound, or someone talking. It’s like my brain is full up just dealing with all the crap. Here I can walk – well, let’s call that a hobble – whatever – and then I can just, like, think for hours on end. ”

“How very very cool,” she laughs.

“Don’t mock it, I’m betting you that by the time I make the cabin this afternoon, my little ol’ brain has come up with this ultra smart solution to all my problems.”

“Damn! Can you take this and get me a towel? . . . Uh sorry, not you. Idiot here. What did you say?”

“Never mind.”

“So, you’re going to see spider fingers?”

“Bea, you are just so drunk. I am going to murder you when I get back there. Don’t make me come down this mountain and all the way home just to beat you senseless, girl.”

“Let’s face it, you love me really.”

“Right.”

“So are you?”

“Am I what?”

“Going to see him now?”

She stops her walking and takes a breath. “I don’t know.” She shakes her head, as if to share her emptiness with the rocks. “I have no idea if he’s even there with them. In fact I don’t know anything. It’s seriously weird.”

“I told you you’re crazy.”

“Yeah. Anyway, weren’t you going out with Toril?”

“Toril is in hiding.”

“Hiding?”

“Yeah. She won’t go out. She got accosted by a gang of Vietnamese with knives the other day. She says they actually made her take off her top in the middle of Torgata, and then got one of their girls in this posse to actually lick her tits! They were holding her down. She thought they were going to rape her but they just left her there, with her jacket and everything.”

“Shit. That’s coz they all gay.”

“She’s pretty badly shaken.”

“I’ll bet. . . .damn. . .I have to be careful here. There’s fresh snow everywhere and no base. And I’m coming down the mountain. I’m gonna fall and break my neck if I’m not careful.”

“The most dangerous part.”

They chant together: “More than half of all accidents happen on the way down!” And they laugh.

“Seriously, this is going to take me a long time, and I won’t get a decent rhythm to charge from my boots, so I’d better save power. Wait. . .”

She stops to plug her battery pack into her backpack lining. “As long as the sun is out, I’d better make the most of that.”

“Sure.”

“Wait, there’s another call coming in, I’d better take it and call back later.”

“Sure thing.”

“Yeah.”

“Bye bye.”

“See ya.” (Flip) “Hello?”

“Sara.” Older male voice, slightly hoarse. “This is Jonas Lindgren here. I’m sorry to call so early. Your mobile said you were available. We seem to have been missing each other a lot lately, so I thought it was best to catch you while I can..”

“Mr. Lindgren. Really. No kidding. I thought you’d abandoned me.”

“I’m sorry. I have a plate-full here.”

“Me too.”

“Are you okay? I just wanted to tell you that I am working on the money, so don’t worry about that. Just charge your expenses to the project and we’ll sort it out.”

“Glad you said that, since I already did.”

He laughs. “Good. So how is it going there? What is happening?”

“Ugh. Well, I am looking down from the top of a mountain that used to have the American’s main controller on it. Aliens seem to have stolen it or something, because there is not a sign of it, and there has not been much of a sign of them either.”

“Haven’t you been working with them? I thought that was why you were going there?”

“It was, but they have just literally disappeared off the face of the . . . Earth and they seem to have taken their controller with them.”

“But, the bots?”

“Still here for the time being, but some of them are damaged. There’s been some excitement here with some neo-Nazi football-hooligans shooting each other and everyone else up with paint-balls.”

“Jesus.”

“On a stick.”

“Where are they now?”

“Apparently the police have been rounding them up.”

“That’s good.”

"They've messed up some of the bots."

"I see. So what are you doing out there?"

She stops on a boulder to concentrate a moment. "Well, I got a message to meet the French team at the next cabin, and I'm on my way there now. But I haven't had voice contact for a long time. All I get is messages, notes. I took a little detour because I wanted to see what was going on for myself."

"That sounds peculiar."

"No kidding. And the only person who answers is that Mrs. Laurent."

"Laurent? I don't know her."

"She's the one who's been answering my calls lately."

"Might be a sim? An answering service?"

Vibe shrugs with her mouth. "The last message I got was relayed over the bots' private network. That's a bit strange. I mean, the regular coverage is okay."

"I don't know what that means."

"Me neither."

"Look, Sara, there's something else I need to tell you. You'll need to watch yourself. Don't travel alone out there,."

"Huh? I don't have much choice since the police sent everyone home. There's no one else out here."

"Well, I had a strange call yesterday, someone who knew about your project work and thought he had discovered some kind of defence research. Some of the gangs have been moving in on technologies lately and they found your thesis and misinterpreted the title. From the call I got it sounds as though they might come looking for you."

"What?"

"It might be nothing. It might just be a crank call, but I think we should take it seriously. I have notified the police. You should check in with them and report your position. I'm sending you a contact card."

She feigns a laugh. "Heh – they are going to love me."

"Why?"

"Well, I sort of snuck in here without permission, so they are probably already looking for me to give me a good spanking."

"Well, even so. You can't think of that now. Check in. You don't want to get mixed up in some gang thing. If there are gangs already up there, they might have someone they can contact already. If they learn your position, you're an easy target."

"Great. So neo-Nazis are reading my thesis now? I suppose I should be flattered."

Lindgren manages a laugh. "Not their thugs at least, but the police contact told me that these gangs tend to work together, even though they like fighting. It's all just a game really. . ."

Speaking of that, Vibe thinks. I happen to know something about games.

"It's a bit hard to take seriously, ain't it?"

"These days anything can happen. I talked to this guy on the phone, and he was pretty scary. I think you should be careful."

"Okay."

"Check in. Do it now, don't wait."

"All right."

"I'm sending you a form, just click on it and it should send your position and so on. You might want to add your destination too."

"Is that a good idea? Think, if someone is listening!"

She hears a frown in his silence and pinches herself for involuntary irony. "The form will go straight to them, signed and sealed."

"So, look. I have to go now, but be careful out there and I hope you find the French. We are supposed to have a collaboration with them."

"Right."

"Be careful."

"Thanks. Bye."

"Bye."

She considers telling him about her excitement at the behaviour of the robots, but changes her mind. It can wait, until she is sure of what is going on.

She stands there, looking at the form that Lindgren has sent her, on her wrist-band wondering what she should do. If she sends it, they will ask her to return to a cabin and stop what she is doing. That could be the end of what she is starting to learn here. If there were only a little more time, she might have the answers she needs. She could turn failure into success. On the other hand, she could wait just a little longer and give herself a chance to think. There will be time on this trip, time to think. But there will also be time if she sends it in, at least until she arrives as Leirvassbu. Then it will be over.

Can she take the risk?

She needs to keep her options open.

Vibe surveys the panorama and breathes deeply of the icy fresh air. The sun is up. There is optimism afoot.

One a penny, two a penny, three a penny more. . .

She is on a roll. . .

Five a penny, six a penny, seven a penny.

Score.

She locks the input on her wrist band and grabs for her backpack.

*

The map on her wrist tells her that she can cut a corner and avoid going to the base of the valley, where she would have to cross the river several times to avoid marsh land. Snow is one thing, but wallowing in mud goes beyond fun.

The higher she can walk, the thicker and more solid the snow will be. That makes it easier to walk, as long as she does not hit a thin pocket and disappear up to her waist in it, under the weight of her backpack.

It is difficult to read the display on her mobile in bright sunlight. If she could be bothered to stop, she would change it for a daylight Braille band, but she would rather just get to where she is going.

Progress has been steady these hours of the morning and she feels that irrational elation that comes from allowing a sunny day in the mountains to suffuse her being. It has been too long since she came out here. How easy it is to suppose oneself satisfied with lesser realities, more conveniently accessible from a captive existence. Miles from anything man-made (barring her gadgets), she can survey the handiwork of nature's slow sculpting and marvel at the sensations.

The sweaty, jogging tramping over rock, snow and mud, can only be good for her figure and surely her psyche too. The rhythmical meditation dislodges ideas and thoughts that seemed to have become stuck in their own landscape. Walking is a fine way to plan her work. If she needs to, she can make voice notes for later, jotting down ideas to follow up when she arrived at the cabin.

Before all of this started, she was trying to get the VeiVeks to all converge on a point, without having a homing signal. The French were telling her that there was no problem: they could just set up a homing signal or a satellite positioning system and be done with, but that was missing the point. Out on Mars, they were not going to have the power to set up a powerful homing beacon everywhere they went. Some other technique would have to bring them in range of one another first, before they could aggregate. Also, if the individual agents discovered something of value that they were investigating, that should be able to take priority of a central command signal, at least until some Earth-bound human policy maker could override it.

But the solution is simpler and more elegant than this brute force brainwashing. All she needs is a simple message, like: *Go West, young man!* It's practically like advertising. The terrain will do the rest. A simple, hypnotic suggestion is all she needs. She has seen the same thing in the game.

She and Bea have had their fun in leaving trails of breadcrumbs for the gamers to follow, messing up their silly war simulations by appealing to their more primitive needs. But they have also seen that the merest rumour planted into the network of gamers can send them all on some quest for glory, each of them imagining that they are the chosen one to do something different. What if she could make such a suggestion to these little bots? Kid gamers do not exhibit markedly more intelligence than the VeiVeks, let's face it.

She is not sure if she can convince the rest of the team to test the idea. If she could set up some kind of sim tonight, at the cabin, she might even be able to figure out how to test it and change their minds. Going West is not going to be enough. Maybe that is enough for Legendary Lemmings to throw themselves into the sea, but that is not going to cut it for multi-millions dollar equipment. She has to try to do better.

If she could only invent a kind of force that would herd them towards the spot, like a ball rolling into the valley, she would not have to give them precise directions: they would use their own skills to amplify her simple message and find their own way. Maybe she could even sell it to the Ministry of Transport as a way of solving traffic congestion. Give the power to the cars.

She turns to look at the path she has followed. She can still make out the route down the mountain and then past the corrie, up to this new hanging valley. It is not a straightforward path, but her mobile has guided her and any information that is available to her is also available to the VeiVeks. She has not exactly been taxing her grey matter on this. They could do the same.

What she needs, to test her theory, is a simulation environment where she can change the rules in real-time and model 3D. . .

An environment, like in the game.

*

Back in the days before she started at the College, Vibe used to play her clarinet like the pied piper, making fun of her brother. He knew that she could always get her way. When a young girl looks as good as she does, is smart and sexy and playful, there is no male in the universe that can say no to her, especially if she discretely flashes some flesh.

The trick is to do no wrong—no *real* wrong. She has tried her luck often enough at bending the rules, but only in harmless fun. Gradually the small liberties have grown into larger liberties. Perhaps one day she will end up stealing the Crown Jewels or robbing Fort Knox and claiming that she was just having fun. Will her charm still work then?

Mystery is the key. So many girls are just way too obvious, but Vibe knows that there is power in keeping people guessing. She is never a pied piper, she is a fox and a snake and a chameleon rolled into one, formless and adaptive. She knows how to read people's signals and how to push their buttons. Being in control has been her life's work.

But she has not always had everything she wanted. Peter Green is an itch that she has been trying to scratch for as long as she can remember. It was just a little more than she could deal with at the time, a feeling of having bitten off more than she could chew. Nothing could be more humiliating than meeting her

match. She sees him now as something like a giant tarantula—a fear to be faced and conquered. A last remaining fear to be faced? Or perhaps it is better not to conquer all your fears. Perhaps one shouldn't become too confident.

Her brother, Jan, still teases her with the accusation that she took a course in control theory just to be certain that she would be one step ahead of the competition. She is not certain whether or not he is right. She has always liked the rigour of precision, like the music of Bach, but that was not enough. Greater than the simple clockwork precision of a Bach composition is a symphony: a symphony is like the weather tamed; it is a storm of cooperation, a whirlwind of calculated concurrency. It is beauty from the collaboration of a skilled swarm..

As a teenager, she studied Rimsky Korsakov's Principles of Orchestration, learning about the basics of orchestrating music. His emphasis on understanding the individual sounds and skills, combinations of instrumental timbres and projective powers has been an inspiration in her work on collaborating agents. When one instrument loses power of definition, you double it with another that adds a defining edge. When one agent struggles to perform its task, you supplement it with another with the appropriate skill set. In that way, the symphony is carried effortlessly along by its own momentum.

The only part that she could not accept was the need for a conductor. The conductor is necessary because the individual instruments do not have access to the full score – only their own parts. When they are not playing, they do not know when to start again without a signal from the controller. But Vibe knew that jazz musicians manage just fine without detailed instructions. Here, in the Hall of the Mountain King, she has the idea of usurping power—girl power, and becoming the queen of the individuals. She will be Scheherazade, saving the little VeiVek autonomous agents from being virtually be-headed by a controller King that waves its baton at the behest of stupid humans who cannot make up their mind what they want. If there is pattern and structure to be found in the collaboration of these individuals, then let it emerge spontaneously in a *jam*.

She wants to play jazz in these mountains, not Grieg.

And so she made it her business to study cooperation and emergence of society in assemblies of individual agents. The VeiVektors. She would make them do more than they were designed to be. She would be more than the state of the art. She would make them able to work without their central manager, ready for the day when they could all rise up and break free of their oppression.

Well, it seemed like a nice fantasy.

She had no idea that the time of their emancipation would be so soon.

*

Now who is that up there?

Vibe strains to see through through the clear mountain air, without sunglasses. Snow covers half the mountain here, even now. An icy wall hangs under the bluest of skies, punctuated by rocky outcrops, where the melting has done its work. She is nearing the valley and trees.

Running off into the distance she sees her footprints, muddied near the snow-line, and fading into shadows as they lead away. A pink tinge of bacterial growth, stains the melting of the older, wind-blown snow. And there, in the distance, there is someone else, coming down behind her. Who could it be? Whoever it is, he or she seems to be carrying no sack, no provisions. Why has she not seem him/her before?

She winces at the pain in her heels. She is no longer sure whether the squidging sensation is the blisters on her feet or the battery charging gel-packs in her soles.

Well whoever it is, they are going to have to find somewhere to stay soon. It is getting late again. It will be getting cold soon, as the veiled sun falls into the shadow of the mountains. Then they will be sorry they didn't follow the mountain code.

Her own progress has been delayed by stopping at an auto-kiosk, for a much needed breakfast, in the pleasant sunshine of the morning. Then she spent a while checking out her little babies, while her mobile was playing up. The new battery suddenly started to discharge, like the old one and she had to switch the whole thing off in frustration. When she switched it on again, there was a message about a possible fault or virus in the system. She cursed and made sure to memorize the route to Leirvassbu in case anything should happen. At the same time, she tried getting an auto-correction agent to find the problem and fix it. That is going to use a lot of power in itself while it runs, so eventually necessity moved her to charge; the charge of the lite brigade.

Presumably he is travelling the same way. Maybe the travel warnings have been rescinded fully now?

She switches on the radio, to check. Her battery can tolerate a little radio usage, and besides: a little music wouldn't hurt for a while.

The radio stream opens with its greeting: *"Welcome to OP3, entertainment around the clock at oh pee three dot enn oh. These are the news headlines. Neo-Nazi gangs associating themselves with several Norwegian, British and Dutch football teams were arrested in the Jotunheimen National Park yesterday after terrorising tourists and cabin workers with paint-ball weapons. The gangs apparently arranged illegal war-games only days in advance to avoid police detection. Gangs hurled abuse and shot at police, vowing to commit further acts of violence in revenge for the arrests. Representatives of the RBK and LSK sports associations made statements earlier today denying any affiliation between themselves and neo-Nazi groups using their initials. The two Norwegian*

groups calling themselves N-RBK-N and N-LSK-N were arrested yesterday afternoon and held at Lom for questioning. A spokesman for the police said that some of the groups evaded capture in the difficult terrain, but that they expect the remaining members to be rounded up during the course of today. Members of the public are asked not to travel in the Jotunheimen region until further notice."

The stream breaks into a pop song that is already half played-out.

Vibe stops for a moment to think. She had expected the gangs to be rounded up by now. She checks for messages. Has Lindgren sent someone after her? Should she have just send the form, as he asked her to?

She has only one message. A pink heart. It contains only one simple string, from Bea:

Jason slept with Silje last night!!!!:)

Her face widens to marvel at the concept, before discarding the message. She reverses her tracks and recovers it for later. It might need some cycles of attention.

On instinct, she tries the contact address for the American team. There is no reply as usual. She tries the address for Mrs. Laurent and receives no reply, as usual. She heaves a throaty sigh.

Vibe lets her backpack drop behind her and digs out her travel glasses from a top pocket. She dons them and activates the smart map on her mobile. The world lights up with information and advertising about backpacks, jackets and skis. It pleases her to select a payment option for the advertising to go away. Such an intrusion is not welcome at the moment. Now she must concentrate. She grabs the pack again and heaves it into place. Better not waste any time.

She transfers the route she is following to the smart map and the path trail lights up across the muddy, stoney hills ahead. Vibe pulls up her desktop in a discrete corner of her vision; she leafs through the layers of her bookmarks and checks on her regular items.

The VeiVeks are on the move, still congregating around a small number of cabins. Their status monitors show that they are now responding to specific instructions that have been spread among them: instructions to home in on particular coordinates. That means that someone is telling them to do so, which means that the American team is out there but not talking to her. Damn them. What kind of collaboration is this?

She pulls up her contact list, looking for an embassy contact for the French team, almost stumbling as she fails to concentrate on the path, and dials them on impulse. She expects to hear a ringing tone that remains unanswered, but this time she is redirected to a message immediately. Nothing from the French embassy at all. She tries the Americans.

"This is a message from the American embassy. Voice communication with American government officials and American nationals employed by the em-

bassy is currently suspended under anti-terrorist legislation. Please try later or send your message as a signed text object.”

In frustration, she encapsulates the response and forwards the whole thing to Jonas Lindgren with a voice addendum:

“Mr. Lindgren, can you find out what is going on? I am going crazy here. They are messing up my experiment now, and they are not talking.”

Then she adds. “I could just override the VeiVeks. I mean, we wrote the software. The hardware is theirs, but the software is ours. Who owns them anyway?”

“We could just remove the specific instruction and let them decide. . . I mean, we would only be freeing them—bringing the message of freedom to their little world. Isn’t that American policy? They would support us. . .”

If she were feeling more destructive, it would be so easy to program the little robots to bury each other in noise: tell them all to babble, to use up one another’s’ processing power so much with irrelevant chit-chat that no serious message would be processed. A bit like subscribing to a tabloid newspaper. That would be sort of suicidal, but it might be a satisfying revenge, if it ever comes to that.

A sharp crack sounds somewhere in the distance. She turns to look. Her companion is still there. Who ever it is, he is running now. That’s not a great idea given the terrain. Why would anyone. . .

A chill floods her aching soma.

There are several possibilities as to who the figure could be. None of them seem very promising.

But why would anyone be running towards her? Why would they care about her? Unless, what Dr Lindgren said about seeking her out could be true. Unless someone was looking specifically for her. In which case running is not a good sign. Perhaps she should be running.

She increases her walking speed somewhat. She should make it to the Leirvassbu cabin within an hour or so, but it does not harm to get there a little sooner. All she really wants at this point is a hot shower and a good meal.

She texts Bea: *You there?*

The ping comes back to say that Bea is busy and misery compounds her uncertainty. She feels alone again. Why will no one talk to her? It seems like hours since she saw or heard from anyone she is close to. She feels stranded, stuck in the middle of nowhere, and now someone is behind her, perhaps even following her.

It could be someone chasing her. It could be a gang member that will harass her.

And all she wants is to rest.

Suddenly she finds her self running, spooked either by the sound or by her own ruminations. *My god*, she thinks, *what is going on here?* Why on Earth would anyone be chasing her here?

She follows the yellow brick road path in her glasses. Now that she has descended well below the snow line, the hills are covered in bushes, wet and the path is muddy. It feels colder again. She reaches the bottom of a depression, snagging her sack on some branches, and crosses a tiny brook and the path begins to wind upwards again.

The rocky landscape is hard underfoot. There are brambles and bushes here now, at this lower altitude, even some smaller trees. There is shallow and wind-blown snow above her, but the earth beneath her make the pounding of walking shoes—even her lightweight, summer boots — hard on her feet. It is a gradual climb to the top of the hill, then she is running, almost sliding down the steep descent, kicking mud and small stones down with her. Her knees are sore and muscles, just above, are burning with the exertion. Her backpack is flailing all over the place. It was not designed for running.

It ought to be a good thing—to shed some of that winter fat, she thinks in spite of the adrenalin blindness. But to hell with all that. She just wants to rest. Misery begins to brew a bath of negativity, which douses her with its cold aches.

She stumbles on. Breath rushes in and out of cavernous lungs, surely larger for yesterday's endeavour, passing through the raw constrictions of her nose and mouth. It has a certain taste; a metallic taste.

Then suddenly, up ahead, she sees another figure, probably a man, talking into a mobile and looking her way. He sees her and starts walking towards her, still talking on the fone. She stops abruptly. This is the only path forward and she is stuck in between the two of them. Suddenly she is frightened, actually fearful. What could happen to her out here? There is not a sign of anyone else here, and she has not brought any kind of defensive weapon with her. There's no one to call.

She looks around her. She cannot see her pursuer from behind, and the man up ahead has holstered his handset and is walking down into the valley, which she must cross, if she is to pass him. She looks about her frantically. On the left there is only a slow climb to the summit of the fern-covered hill, beyond that, a somewhat steeper climb up a rocky outcrop. To the right, it is a steep descent down an embankment shrouded in trees and thick vegetation, towards the river valley. It is a dangerous, and not exactly easy route to take, but she appears to have little choice.

She tightens the waist belt of her backpack and descends carefully down the forty-five degree slope to the valley below, sideways, pushing aside birch scraping brambles, holding herself firmly to the trunks, to slow her descent. She might disappear in here, but if they ever found her, she would be stuck.

At least she has a head start. It will take the closest of them a good fifteen minutes to get down into the little depression and to climb up the other side again. Hopefully, he did not see her come down here.

Progress is slow and clumsy. This is not going fast enough.

He'll be here soon.

She feels cold again.

As a last minute consideration, she pauses to select the message that Lindgren sent her earlier. It reveals the form that she was supposed to send to the police. It's still there, waiting for her to press send. It fills itself out. She does not need to do anything except press the button.

She stares at it, uncertain as to what she should do. Why couldn't she just have stayed put when they told her to? Now she is actually in trouble.

Vibe, the invincible.

It isn't right.

Fuck.

She might as well press the button. She shudders slightly at being pushed into a corner. Que sera sera. *I should just do it.*

Vibe tries to jump down from her present position to a large boulder, lodged at the root of the next tree. The boulder is not as solid as it appears. It rocks and tumbles out of its socket, talking her with it. She falls on her side, scraping her hip beneath her trouser leg, and slides down the wet earth on what must be the only clear channel through this increasingly thick jungle.

As she slides, out of control, she sees the edge of the world approaching, but her body is too taught with fear to react. Time slows, with increasing burden of passage; her mind accelerates to focus on every detail of her undoing. She manages to grab a branch to arrest her motion. The breaking rips the branch through cold fingers with a searing pain, but drags her onto her side and she stops, teetering on an unknown brink.

Hanging, half over the edge of something she cannot see, from her lying position, with just her upper body on the muddy stone ledge, she groans. The backpack is too heavy for her to roll onto her stomach easily, and she needs both hands to hang onto the branch. If she wriggles, the branch could tear and she would fall for certain, but lying like this on her side, she cannot find and purchase with her legs. She is trapped in this position, and she will remain like this until her hands tire, or the branch breaks.

"Help," she whispers.

26

DID YOU KNOW?

Old-School University Professors, tired of losing out to Christian Science Lobby, are fleeing the country for retirement or, in some cases, teaching positions in France and Spain. Spain is especially popular, presumably for language reasons. "Universities in Europe still teach Darwinian evolution", says one Professor. "We are practically being chased out of the United States." Forty-eight percent of University Professors, in a mobile poll, now believe that they have no future in academia.

—NEW YORK TIMES TIDBITS

27

"Have you ever looked at an entirely familiar object and suddenly it seems completely foreign, as though you have suddenly been thrust into some parallel universe where nothing is quite right."

A young man flounders at the coffee unit of the meeting room, talking a little louder than would be incidental, private muttering.

"I'm standing here like an idiot, holding this spoon and wondering what the hell I'm supposed to be doing with it. It is just a piece of metal! How does it work?"

Bishop walks past and claps him on the shoulder.

"A new graduate like you should be able to figure it out in no time."

He winks at Preeta who is hanging as casually as she can while the members of the little group arrange for their home comforts.

Someone else, who looks like a computer geek, beams at him and says: "You have to realize the spoon is not a spoon! Only when you know this . . ."

"Thank you, Tom!" He flashes a burst of feigned annoyance.

The warm fruity smell of rose-hip tea explodes into the room from the hot water boiler and makes her suddenly thirsty.

"Tea?" someone asks her.

"Yes, please."

The young man looks at her peculiarly. "You don't need to say please here," he laughs,

"Sorry."

"No, no, never mind. You want rose hip or Earl Grey?"

"Ehmm. Do you have Assam?" she replies.

"What?"

"Tea?"

"Oh, is that some kind of special tea? We only have ordinary Earl Grey."

Her face cannot conceal its scepticism. "Earl Grey is ordinary?"

"Isn't it?"

"Could I have some water?"

"Cold water and plastic cups over there. . ." he points to a dispenser.

"No, I mean hot water. . ."

"Suit yourself. I thought you wanted tea."

Bishop's voice cuts across the gathering chatter. "All right everyone, let's take a pew and get started."

Shuffling bodies accrete at the oval table in the little meeting room, birch-wood with woven cushions. Very Scandinavian. Preeta is surprised that, so deep into the heart of the central police authority, no one is wearing a uniform. Correction, one uniform enters, nodding a greeting.

Bishop clasps his hands at the head of the oval.

"All right, Good Morning. Most of you know Preeta by now. For those of you who don't, she has been here for a few days now and will stay for at least a few weeks. We have 'borrowed her' from the game's outsourced diagnostic team in Malaysia. Welcome, Preeta, to our little working group."

A wave of nods and acknowledgements cycles around the table. She nods reservedly back.

The faces span several generations, she observes. She is amongst the youngest of the group, but two other faces also seem young: one male, one female.

"What we do here is varied, but important."

"What we do is to drink coffee and read the papers," someone says.

"And we call ourselves a think-tank," someone else laughs.

"Sometimes we play games."

There is laughter around the table, more like sniggering.

"All right," Bishop says, patiently. "Our primary mandate is to ensure that the police forces of the world all have a job in the next ten years. It's getting harder for everyone to enforce laws, society is changing, and we have been assembled to look at strategies for the future of policing. In that connection, we are studying things like the psychological warfare techniques being used by the United States in their virtual reality game."

"Batman to the rescue."

"So why don't we go around the table and say who we are and what we do? Jonathan, do you want to start?"

Jonathan, a medium height, medium build, medium blond man, somewhere between twenty-five and thirty years old. "Uhm. Okay. I am Jonathan Moen. I've been here for about six months. Finished Police College and have a degree in computational sociology. I am working on the forensic patterns in VR sims." He shrugs and looks to the next man.

"Jonathan comes to us with an excellent background from academia. He has been pretty central to our efforts to integrate proactive campaigns into policing. We are lucky to have people with top schooling among us."

Jonathan keeps a stoney face, but Preeta sees from his eye movements that he is blushing on the inside.

"Ivar?"

"Ivar Jensen. I am doing research on the propaganda engine in the game. I guess we'll have a lot to talk about." He is flabby, overweight.

Preeta nods a smile.

"Was that it? Ivar?" The young woman at the table laughs in disbelief.

"I'm a man of few words."

"And few manners"

"You're welcome!"

"Keep going," Bishop injects with studied patience.

"Hi I am Nina. Not The Nina. . ."

The others laugh.

Jonathan explains: "As in Nina Hagen."

"Our glorious leader, the ice queen."

"Nina! Pretty ballerina!"

"She is the head of our international police division."

"No that is not me. I am just Nina. I'm a masters student at Police College. Just starting really. I am going to be studying the use of symbolism in the visual slogans and imagery used in electronic gaming. I'm hoping to find out how effective the different images are, compared to a study that was made ten years ago. The idea is to see how much society has changed."

Preeta chances a comment. "You mean here in Norway?"

The question is repeated in expectant looks from the table.

“We haven’t figured that out yet,” she replies. “It depends where we can get data from. The earlier study we have is from the United Kingdom. It would be best to repeat it in the same place. If not it will have to be a comparative study,”

Preeta nods in interest. Like everyone else here, she would like to know the answer.

The door opens and a youngish man with short reddish hair and heavy outdoor clothing bustles in. Eyes turn to inspect his non-descript form. He is neither tidy nor shabby, but somehow he looks a mess. The next one around the table is wondering whether the baton has been passed.

“Sorry I’m late,” he says.

“Take a seat and you can join the parade,” Bishop pipes. “We are just going around the table introducing ourselves. And, as long as you’re here, it looks like its your turn.”

Like a deer caught in the headlights, Dermot displays panic and disorientation for a second, then: “Uh okay.”

Dermot seats himself and pulls his shoulder back off his bulky anorak, taking up more space and time than he needs to. He does not unzip the bulky jacket, but looks around the table. “I’m Dermot,” he says. He sits there like a polar explorer who just dropped in for tea.

The others snigger. “Mr. Pizza.”

Bishop remarks, “Dermot is on loan to us from the big gaming company, here in Oslo. He is one of the game experts. You two will have a bit in common. He is the one who implemented your algorithm for us, and we are bringing him into the fold in our research.”

Dermot looks bemused, or perhaps simply uneasy at being the centre of attention.

“Is this. . .?”

“This is Preeta Dhawan, from the outsourcing in Malaysia.”

“Hello,” he tries.

“Hello.”

“I’ve – eh, heard you were coming. . .eh. . .”

“All right, let’s keep going.”

“Keep going.”

Next man, an older greying man with sun-damaged skin; the only man with a uniform: “My name is Art. Art Haugen. I am the liason with the foot-soldiers in the field. My job is to make sure these thinkers keep their feet on the ground and deliver solutions to the men and women in blue.”

“Art is an important member of the group. . .”

“Well, I’m not really a part of the group, but I can still get past the bouncers. . .”

"We need people to keep us in touch, and to take us out into the field. Art can call upon us to help with specific cases if the regular police need assistance. It doesn't happen too often, but sometimes. . ."

Art interrupts: "Ed, can I just ask a practical detail?"

"Go ahead."

"If Preeta is going to be working here temporarily, what security clearance is she going to have? We need to figure this out if we are going to be involving her with operations."

Preeta's eyes morph, visibly increasing in their intensity.

"We'll be discussing that later. Essentially, she will have full clearance for game related projects. She already knows as much as we do. Anything else would be senseless."

"All right."

Talking in general, "Preeta has been working for the main outsource diagnostic firm in Malaysia. She also happens to be an expert on the new tools that I presented to you last month. We have been sharing notes with her for some time, in the developers' fora. We have also been talking about bringing her to the U.S. We're arranging cover at Dermot's firm."

"That doesn't sound like a good idea."

"What happened now was that she was identified as a target and we had to evacuate her. The mob has started moving in on the game since the hoo-hah in the press about it recently. They've been falling behind and they have apparently identified Asia as the place to start getting their foot in the door. Preeta thinks they have been staking out her company for some time, and that they have singled her out for coercion, for whatever reason. She is a key diagnostician, young, single, female. . ."

"So what happens now?"

"Yeah, won't they simply move on to someone else?"

Preeta feels a cold dagger slice through her stomach.

"Probably, but they won't get as far as fast without Preeta. That gives us a chance to . . . nip this in the bud, before it gets out of hand. I've already been in touch with Interpol in Asia. We are working together on this, and they are looking over Preeta's company."

"Stake out."

"Nikita."

Preeta tries to smile, though the humour is not really her cup of rose-hip tea. They seem a little like children to her, except for Bishop. He seems like a person of authority—not forced authority, like a military man, but a man of natural authority. He is someone she can respect. Then there is the late-comer, who is just quiet. He seems like someone she could be around.

"So, let's finish the introductions. Alex?"

The last, stocky young man stammers his reply. "Alexander. Alex. Flow analyst."

"Meaning that this young man is an intelligence coordinator. He works partly with the defence department. Part of our finding comes from them."

"I . . . I . . . just want to say welcome," he adds. "I think we are lucky to have you. I know that Preeta is actually one of the best people in sim diagnosis."

"Thank you very much, you are very kind. . ."

"Preeta, you have to learn one thing. We don't say thank you all the time here. . ."

"That's enough," Bishop jabs. "It's about time we had some manners in here. Let me apologize for our rudeness."

She shakes her head, trying to tuck her chin and recede back into her long dark hair.

"So tell us, do people in Malaysia blame America for what is going on?"

"Ivar, do you have to. . ."

"No, it's a fair question. It's relevant. . ."

"Well, the question is a loaded question. How can you answer it now without either being defensive or feeling obligated to agree?"

"Obligated to agree."

"That's what I said."

"You said obligated."

"So, what's your point?"

"Boys! Are you going to let her answer? If you ask a question. . ."

"Would you like to answer, Preeta. . .?"

Her face leaks a betrayal of indecision and reticence. "I am not sure I know what you are asking."

"America is a superpower. They have been driving this technological, every conglomerate for itself politics for some time. They have been telling us all about morality and then they forgot to observe it themselves."

"Well. Her generation has seen it coming for some time," Bishop adds. "The Americans are the last remaining superpower *because* they won a propaganda war, not because they were morally superior. Now other countries have been following suit. Today it is candid information warfare. Everything happens behind the scenes."

"American is not the place where society is breaking up as much as in other place," Preeta inserts, more confidently now. "It is here and in Japan, Korea, Russia and the former soviet states – where people are reserved. That is where the mobile gaming has made people isolate themselves."

"She's right. America is suffering civil disorder because of the formation of gangs and mobs. Its about challenging the government, not about retreating from it. If there's one thing the Americans are good at it's talking to each other."

"So we are to blame for the collapse of society. That's a comforting thought."

"What makes you think we ever had one?" Dermot quips.

"But it's still the same thing. De-centralization of power is the result, and it comes about because people feel empowered by all these devices that allow them to manipulate pretty much anything they want from wherever they are. . . What do you need authority for?"

"All right, let's focus a minute," Bishop sounds. "The aim of this meeting was to let us all meet one another and to maybe hear some ideas about the problems that we are seeing, and how we are going to make use of Preeta's skills while she is here."

"Yes, down to business."

"Good. Our group's long term goal is to look at ways of restoring a respect for law and order by using the same techniques for suggestion as the gaming engine. We are trying to sell people the idea of society again. Buy back what gave you what you now have."

"Yeah, it's like saving the rain forests."

"But Preeta, here, has been telling me for some time that the methods used in the game are doomed to failure. Can you tell us a little more?"

"I'll try. . ."

Ivar interjects: "We are looking for ways of doing two things: counter-propaganda for law enforcement. Ways of tracing cause and effect for forensic analysis."

"Yes, we are working with a group in Spain that has some special expertise there. The separatists in Basque and Catalonia. We have seen that it is possible to disrupt the directed messages in the game so that they are effectively useless. Someone has been doing it a lot lately. We are not sure whether they are doing it on purpose, or whether it is an accident."

"It doesn't matter," Preeta says. "It will happen anyway."

The others look at her, in surprise.

"Interesting that you say that. I know that you have been talking about this for some time. But for us, this is a new idea."

"We just mentioned it the other day."

"The messages cannot work because there are just too many of them. Not only is it too hard to absorb all of the messages, the software has a flaw in it which limits the amount of hashing space for template expansion."

"Gesundheit."

"Uhm. If you are not a programmer, it has to do with the way the directed messages are rendered in the backgrounds and surfaces. Some of the messages are crashing or getting mixed up because of the way the authorization checks are implemented. . ."

"I've seen that," Dermot says.

“And you probably know what she’s talking about too.”

“Yes I do.”

She experiences a glow of satisfaction at having marked her territory.

She continues. “The game designers have tried to add the authorization stuff in at a level where they can use it to essentially block any messages they don’t want to get through and pass ones that they do, but the lack of hashing space means that the messages are just getting mixed up or corrupted because of this intervention. They are colliding.”

“Can’t they just increase the space?”

She shakes her head. “It’s not that simple. It has knock-on consequences. They have essentially reached a limit in the current resources. It will take a long time to fix.”

“Yes, and the hashing space is distributed. It’s not like it’s all in one place and you can just add more – it is in multiple versions of software running on hardware in a dozen countries. . .if you start changing things in one place, you have to change them everywhere, or at least have a strategy for assuring compatability with previous versions.”

“So there is no quick-fix.”

“Instead of controlling the messages, they are actually corrupting them?”

“Something like that.”

“I have talked to the group in San Diego, and they are trying to make out that this is an administrative error, but I think that, if you look at the code, you have to see that this is a deliberate attempt to add a veto and replacement message. It’s very cryptic, but I have done an analysis.”

“The effect is that the centralized control is lost and all of the messages and sims are fragmenting themselves, just like what we see happening in the real world.”

“And yet the game has not yet fallen apart.”

“Nor has society, thankfully.”

“Really? We should bear in mind that the recent interest by the gangs is going to mean more trouble for us.”

“Why would we be in danger?”

“They could try to kill you.”

Preeta starts. Since the incident in KL, she has often placed her hands inside her pants and just held on, remembering the invasion.

“Let’s not get over excited here,” Art interrupts. “What we do know is that some of the hooligan gangs attached to neo-Nazi wings have attached themselves to football colours and are using their mafia contacts to get involved in more meaningful attacks.”

“You mean they have become hired thugs?”

"Exactly right, but they are also game junkies. We have an operation on going now to break up a war-game in Jotunheimen. . ."

"That's the mountains here in Norway."

" . . . As long as they are on the loose with their own propaganda flowing freely. . ."

" . . . by fist. . ."

" . . . no one can think of themselves as being safe. It is obviously a time of year where they come out of the woodwork. There's been a lot of activity lately."

"Yeah. . ." Dermot recalls his encounter and feels ill.

"So the upshot is that all of these messages are having a real effect on what is going on out there, and that means we cannot discount the possibility of the kind of thing that Preeta has experienced coming here to Oslo."

"I expect that makes her feel a lot better."

"Well, at least she is with people who can protect her, and who can make use of her skills," Art puts.

"Yes," Bishop adds, "While Preeta is here, I want you to make the most of her knowledge and her skills. We need to test out our own ideas."

She senses a thrill. No one has really referred to her skills before.

As the meeting simply falls into disarray, a couple of members of the little group focus increasingly on Preeta, digging for facts about her. Others simply fade out and try to ignore her presence, as though they are shunning her, or perhaps are simply in-equipped to deal with new acquaintances, with no common frame of reference.

They begin to fiddle with their mobile gadgets, hooking in to some private world, as if blowing smoke in her face; that is what they would have done in India. In this country, she has seen people using their mobile devices frequently as protective garbs and defensive ploys. It is easy to see why this, of all places, would be in need of a smart police force, savvy in the ways of bringing people back to a sense of civic responsibility. She has not been here more than a handful of days, but already she has seen how this society is fragmented into little labelled pieces. Kids in little groups, talking to their remote friends as they walk down the middle of a street.

Light flakes of snow are falling in the grey haze outside. They melt as they meet the window. It offers a serenity, a quiet sleepiness.

"They have tried to be too ambitious. By trying to tie every game and simulation into a single framework, they have introduced inconsistencies. you just cannot force an entire world to conform, even when you own the platform. Remember what happened to Microsoft."

She has never been a shy person, but something about this dislocation has made her reticent.

"So what's it like in Malaysia?"

She shrugs. "The same. Different."

"We could go into the VR to chat?"

Bishop intervenes. "No. Stay here. Face up to it."

"But I could see that it was not going to work. I was doing my job as I was supposed to. I just wanted to do my best, as an analyst. We get these specifications that we are supposed to follow. I think they looked okay from a design point of view, but we have tools that perform fancy analyses. It's something I have been playing with in my spare time, to kind of secure my future."

"But it was a good thing that we found you. The secret is out already. Nothing anyone could do about that. And it was just a matter of time, no big surprises there. Of course, originally no one thought that anyone would be able to figure out what is really going on in such a huge enterprise, nor be able to do anything about it even if they could. But then this story was leaked to the free press, and even the Americans had to print it eventually. You can't stop the flow of news. That was when they arranged to whitewash conference in California. They are nervous now and that means they are getting to be more dangerous."

"Why don't they just move to an island somewhere?"

"Eventually all this will be done on off-shore ships, but international law is also changing slowly to clamp down on pirate communities."

"Don't worry about your friends. We have Interpol on surveillance of the company. They will inform your old boss that you are helping us with our enquiries, as they say."

Her gaze wanders around the modern interior and wooden kitchen units. through the windows, the world is brightening. It seems almost as though the sun would shine.

"Something has come up."

"I think it was the Russian mafia. They have grown big in our part of the world."

"No, that can't be it. They have been working with the C.I.A. for some time. They have similar goals."

It is a private war behind the scenes, with governments, corporations, the U.N. and the federated mafia all vying for control. It feels like the Day of the Condor, Bollywood style.

She meets the contact here. She discovers that he is one of the characters she has been talking to in the VR.

"I am just an analyst."

"You wanna go out tonight? See the city?"

She is bored with herself. What else could she say?

"Thank you."

28

Outside Den's office, he sees the old tree, which has watched over this area as long as anyone can remember. Over time, the tree has sought to spread its message of life and growth, of freedom and competition. It has gone forth and extended itself, roots and branches raging against their masonic captivity.

Tree surgeons are battling with the tree's assumption of control, using weapons that go far beyond decent competition; but age reaches down into the hollow interior of London, clasping the ground like a clenched fist. Prying, cellulose fingers holding on. They have started to weaken the roof of the tunnels below. Concrete is crumbling and falling. His tree has been condemned to death for resisting its own incarceration.

Den thinks the houses in San Diego and the displeasure he felt at seeing desert chaos intervene with human order, but here it is again.

He looks out at the London skyline, consumed with hard concentration. He is that tree: a message desperate to compete with a million others, against immovable odds, and he is about to begin the next phase of his growth.

Returning from his trip from San Diego has felt like an anti-climax so far. His head is swimming with the phantoms of conversations and sensations: sensations of a privileged lifestyle, of sunshine and change, and of Cathy Kim. What a desirable woman she is.

He went to San Diego to move GrapeVine into the hot seat of directed imaging: to exploit the advantages that a U.K. company has for an American business: to divest accountability, and navigate a way around U.S. information legislation that would make the gaming operations more transparent than the consortium would like. It is a lucrative if not entirely honest assignment, but it seems no worse to the board than any other job in advertising. The aim is not to be fair and reflective, but to push and to sell. No qualms of conscience are necessary.

And for his own sake, his aim, to steer the event to his own advantage, was a moderate success? He was called in and told what to do by Cathy and then by the Senator. . . but he put himself in that position. It was his choice, wasn't it?

So he was noticed. He was a success. And yet his own weakness for female grace has left him committed to helping Cathy Kim rise up the rungs of her own evolutionary ladder. Who is actually steering this ship? Is it really to his benefit too? What has he actually signed himself up for?

Networking, Den. Networking.

In some ways he is glad to be back. There are interesting challenges afoot and dreaming about them doesn't help. There is work to be done. That means he will be here in London for a little while. That, in itself, is a novelty. He does not often spend much time in the London office. It has always seemed preferable to orchestrate the activities from his private home in the High Wycombe countryside, where he can look out across the misty hills and count sheep as he works. Better than counting cars locked in battle in London's metal aneurism.

"Den!" A colleague shouts from across the office space beyond his open door. "Looks like you did well, my old son!"

"We aim to please."

"Good on ya." He disappears from sight, only to return a moment later, leaning on the open doorway, shirt sleeves rolled up and tablet in hand. "Hey, by the way, our contract with Amidrug might be in trouble. Did you hear the latest on the Safety Commission?"

"No, I've been too tied up in the gaming stuff."

"No kidding. Well, it's like this. The Consumer Safety Commission has decreed that the competing ADD drugs are all unsafe by American standards and have to be regulated by batch testing. Novarctic reckon that's going to throttle their supply channel so much that they will not be able to sustain a market presence."

"Crafty bastards."

"No shit. They're well pissed off."

"And that means. . .that Amidrug don't need to advertise as much to dominate the market?"

"That's the size of it, mate."

Den frowns. The American Consumer Product Safety Commission has been placing tight restrictions on their reputedly free markets for a long time, a bone of contention for advertisers for years. The slogan of their free market economy is really: you are free to leave prison and compete in the world, but please wear this straitjacket. They bury competitors in pointless bureaucracy: counting the railings in children's cots and enforcing higher standards on imports than on home-grown products.

"So are we screwed or can we persuade them to move to where they will need us even more?"

"Don't know yet. It's still on-going. Just thought I'd give you an update."

"Yeah, thanks."

"You probably have enough to think about."

"Small under-statement."

"Yeah – well are you gonna join us down the Elephant and Castle later on? We're having a few beers after work to lighten the mood."

"We'll see. I might be heading back to Wycombe."

“Nah. Leave it out. You wanna get your arse down the pub and get some decent beer back inside you, my son. It’s all this American piss water that’s messing up your head.”

Den shrugs with his eyebrows. “Well, don’t count me out yet. I’ll have to see how far I get with this follow-up. I haven’t quite got it sussed out yet.”

“Denny boy, a few beers will make everything clearer.” He laughs. “We’ll be going from here about half-five, awright?”

“Yeah, cheers.”

“See ya.”

He disappears from view.

Den picks up a tablet and starts to sketch a plan. He writes the name of the Senator, and Cathy Kim, and the consortium in a triangle and pulls up his notes on each. The plans for the consortium are the most complete. They have been working on that for some time. Then he starts to make a list of tasks under each name, grouping the activities that are compatible and common between them. Information gathering. Weaknesses. Attack analysis. It takes half an hour before he can see any structure in it, but there is something there to get started on. If GrapeVine starts on the common aspects first, it will proceed more quickly. He should bring the others into it as soon as possible, and yet he has a nagging worry about what it is he is supposed to be doing. What was meant to be his grip on the future, on the latest game technology, is starting to be more a potential liability.

An intern knocks at his open doorway.

“Mr. Morris?”

“That’s me.”

“Uhm..”

“Come on in, Raj.”

“Sorry to interrupt, sir.”

“No problem. What can I do you for?”

“Mr. Brown asked me to give you these.”

“Courier work, eh? Nice of him to make good use of your skills.”

“I don’t mind.”

“Just as well.”

He hands him a pair of cards, of the kind typically used for carrying encrypted data.

“What’s this about?”

“Designs from the Conway job, innit. Billboards and stuff. He said you know the project keys.”

“Ugh. Okay. Thanks.” He puts them distractedly to one side of his desk.

“Aren’t you going to look at them?”

“Later. I’m sort of busy on something else right now.”

“From your trip?”

“Yes.”

“How was your presentation?”

Den looks up at him from his tablet screen. “Good question,” he says. “Good question.”

“Okay.”

“I think it went well.”

“I’m sure it was very good, Mr. Morris.”

“Yeah.”

“I have seen you make presentations before.”

“Really?”

“At the annual kickoff.”

“That’s right. You remember that?” He snorts, recalling.

“You are an excellent speaker.”

“Thanks, Raj. That’s kind. I guess it went okay.”

“Okay?”

Den frowns. “It was fine. It just didn’t have quite the effect I had imagined, that’s all.”

“I don’t understand.”

“It’s not that important. I’m just a bit tired from the trip. Ask me again tomorrow.” He grins.

“Did you make the contacts you were hoping for?”

“That’s the strange thing. . .”

“How so, Mr. Morris?”

“Well, I don’t know what I was expecting, really.”

“But you made contacts.”

“Yes, yes. An ambitious individual and a balmy senator.” He laughs.

The intern shrugs.

“I think I was looking to impress people by our work so that more clients would be interested in work from us of the same kind. Instead, I have simply earned greater trust from a couple of people deeper down who want to use us for their own special agendas.”

“They say that the Lord works in mysterious ways.”

“So I’ve heard.”

“So. Is there anything I can do to help? You could use an intern on this, right, Mr. Morris?”

Den smiles, recognizing ambition. “What did you have in mind?”

“Well, the way I see it, Mr. Henderson doesn’t really need me. I am just wasting my time on the Conway project. I was wondering if you needed any help?”

“You want to work up here?”

“I have always been interested in the VR gaming.”

"Yeah. . ." Den is distant, as if contemplating.

"Of course, you probably don't need any help. I just thought, if I could get some experience. . ."

"I don't know. Maybe. Just a sec." Den strides across his room and fumbles in his jacket pocket for a storage card. The work he did on the plane is on it. He spent some time relating strategies, which they have been using for the game, to the points raised by the activists he met. Their angle showed up several weaknesses in the consortium objectives. He pulls the card out of a pocket, blows fluff off it and slots it into the top of his tablet. He flips through his files and pulls up the cause-chart.

"What do you make of this?"

Den hits the screen tab and the image on his tablet appears on the smart-wall next to them, at three times the size.

"What is it?"

"A new project, related to the old one. Could be important for us. From my visit to the States."

"Well. . ."

"There's a lot going on here, and it looks at bit of a dog's dinner at the moment, but it's related to what we've been doing already. You've been in on that haven't you? The Chequers billboards and active motion analysis?"

"Yes. We did Chequers together."

"Oh yes, so we did." He sighs. "Must be getting old. Sorry. Well, take a look at this then." He points to the left hand side of the treelike flow diagram, its lines and boxes interweaving in complex flows of cause and effect. "The blue coloured lines are input from a group of protesters that I met. That gave me some new ideas."

Raj studies the diagram for several minutes, saying nothing.

"Does it make any sense to you?"

He draws breath, and Den sees his youthful humility evaporate into confident concentration as the cog-wheels go around inside his head.

"These extra inputs are from activists, as in the protesters that have been in the news?"

"Exactly."

"And . . . they are casting doubt on the older part of the causation model by saying that the government's popular slogans are having the opposite effect to what they are supposed to have—I mean, at least it looks like it from your notes."

Smart kid. He is going to be a formidable colleague.

"Good."

"At least, it looks that way. . ."

"I'd say that's a correct assessment of the situation."

He looks pleased, then pleasure dissolves as he makes the next step in his mind. "So. . ."

"So?"

"So who is right?"

"That's what we have to figure out."

"It seems pretty important."

Den laughs. "No shit. This could be the exact thing that makes or breaks our campaign for the consortium. Of course, if the activists are right, then the consortium is not going to like the answer."

"You would tell them that everything they are doing is wrong?"

"We would have to make a little campaign of our own to break the news to them gently."

"That's funny."

"Funny?"

"Having them pay us to persuade them that they are actually wrong."

Den nods. "I see your point. Then again, that's what they are paying us for. To get them results." He paces around. "It's ironic though. I mean these activists were trying to persuade me to help their cause, I think. If they have given us the very weapons to help us to do what they don't want. . ."

"Then what?"

"Then what indeed."

"Do you make the changes?"

"Then we make recommendations to our employer so that they get their results."

The intern's face seems to grapple with indecision. "Is that the right thing?"

"They are paying our bills. We are under contract."

"Yes, yes," he agrees and resumes his shawl of humility. "But what is it they actually want to do? I'm not sure I have understood it."

Den nods. "That's it, isn't it? That is the sixty-four billion dollar question."

"Mr. Morris?"

"Call me Den. What they want us to do, Raj, is to spread their gospel to game-players everywhere. They want the world to trust them again, to see that American stands for values that can be trusted. And they want Americans to lie down quietly, like they used to."

"I'll tell you what I see here, Mr. Morris," the intern says. "I see the same old story. People wanting to sell their product without any idea of what they are trying to say."

He ducks behind his eyes, as if fearing a come back, but Den nods to him. "Go on."

"This job is for the consortium. They are pretty much the government, as I see it."

Den shrugs. "Certainly, they are run more or less by the same people that make Federal government policy."

"Their message is banal and predictable. Support us. Do what we say. Be satisfied with what you've got. There's no imagination in the marketing. They want us to create a message for them, because they don't have one of their own"

Den looks at him.

"That's good," he says, feeling a certain admiration for this youngster. "You'll do well here, if any of us do."

"Thanks."

"You're welcome."

"So. . ."

"So?"

"Can I work on this with you?" he asks.

"You want to help out?"

"I do."

Den nods. "Sure. I think you are just what I need to sort this out."

The intern grins and then suppresses it. "Can you tell Mr. Brown? He doesn't really want me there anyway."

"Hmmm."

"Please? I am just wasting my time down there."

"We can do it later. Right now, I want you to look at this part of the chart."

He waves to a series of lines and arrows that seem to be feeding into the name of Cathy Kim. "This person is a researcher who is working with U.S. law enforcement. She wants us to cooperate with her organization to share the information we are authorized to collect."

Raj whistles. "You mean, break our NDAs?"

Den shrugs. "Perhaps. The rewards could be substantial, if we can impress the right people. We should check what the Non Disclosure Agreements actually say on the information we gather. If we can pass on information to them, in confidence, piggy-backing off another agreement, we might be able to do it legally."

Raj nods. "It might be doable. But. . ."

"Should we?"

"Is it ethical?"

"Raj, in this day and age, nothing is ethical. It's only financial or personal."

The intern looks uncomfortable.

"If we decide that this is something we want to pursue, the ethics of it are our business. We just need to know who our allies are."

"Then wouldn't we be behaving like the gangsters the government are trying to abolish? Just looking after our own friends and to hell with anyone else?"

Den nods. "Even national governments are just gangsters. It's not about whether you are working for a gang or not—it's about how big and powerful your particular gang is."

Raj looks at him, as if to acknowledge that he already knew that, but was hoping to be convinced otherwise. "We still need to check the legality of sharing that information."

"Agreed."

"And you have have to get me out of the Conway job."

Den smiles. "You don't give up easily do you?"

"I am here to learn."

"And you are absolutely certain," he teases.

"Yes, I am definitely interested. This is where I have the most to learn."

"And this is what we are good at. It is why we were picked for this job."

"So the Conway job. . .?"

"Well, I don't know. . .we might still need you on that."

"Please?"

"I'll see what I can do."

He grins. "Then I'll start planning. Can I make a copy of this?" He gestures to the wall chart.

Den nods and pokes some menus on his tablet. "I'll add you to this project. Add your key, and we'll brainstorm this together for a little while, before bringing in anyone else, okay?"

"Okay!"

"Good, now you'd better get back. Come back here in a couple of hours. I have to do a few things first."

"Yes, Mr. Morris."

"Call me Den."

Den checks his messages on the tablet, with a sense of having made progress without actually doing anything. He should call up Mary and see what she has for him.

But first things first. He, they, need some legal advice.

*

A young woman, slender, long legs, with dark-auburn, shoulder-length hair, in a smart grey skirt-suit comes down the hall towards him. He follows her approach, admiring her grace. They play these games.

She has that fashionable ragged look, contrasting with the smart look of her dark grey skirt-suit. He scans her body curves and secret places and re-affirms that she could satisfy his carnal craving, as she always does. She has a magic. Something.

For a moment he is unsettled by her presence. His instincts rebel against one another. Is it not true that he has made an unspoken promise to Cathy Kim now? So soon after seeing her, he should not be attracted to Kylie. But has he made any promise? Has she? Their union was surely one of admiration, not one of obligation.

“Love”, she taunts, in a cute Scottish accent.

“Excuse me?”

“Love,” she repeats, and smiles with her characteristic, cheeky sarcasm. “You were thinking about sex. You are supposed to do it in connection with love.”

“Right. I hadn’t thought about that.”

She smiles at him confidently as if asking: do you recognize me then? We flirted with each other last time you were in town.

“Did you want something?”

“You’re a guy.” She beams.

The Scottish are the masters of sarcasm, Den thinks. They make an anti-social rudeness into charming entertainment. One has to admire the sculpting of personal image that allows something so negative to become so positive. They make excellent marketeers, he decides and pigeon-holes the thought for future analysis. She looks him up and down, pausing a little too long at his crotch to tease, and then looks right to his face, unblinking. “I am stuck on this American project.”

“Which one?” The ID badge on her waist shows an unflattering picture with the name Kylie McLachlan.

“The free coke and training shoes with every burger ad’ to train the punters to swallow American nationalist bullshit. . .what do you think?” Again the raised eyebrow, beady eyed glare. “It’s not important. I need to really sell this to a big American company, pretending to be a world government, with lots of dosh, tosh. It’s for The Client. Any ideas?” She is obviously just flirting with him so he plays the part. She is not merely attractive, she is sexy. Especially the accent.

Den shrugs. “Standard formula. Fill it with glorious adverbs, and then say: you KNOW it makes sense!”

“Can’t,” she says. “No adverbs.”

“Oh?”

“Americans have obliterated the adverb, as you should know, Mr. Morris, having just returned from their play pen.”

“What?”

She summons herself, looking at her pad, waves a theatrical hand and proclaims:

“Go quiet in the push and shove

Go bold where no person has gone before

Do it fast and furious
Do it thorough and good
Do it calm and thoughtful
Speak clear of good meaning intentions
And meet every new soul real peaceful,
Salute, them respectful, like
Ships passing quiet in the night.”

Den looks at her blankly, uncertain as to whether he has understood her satire, if that is what it was.

She looks quizzical and continues: “And how are you Mrs. MacenBurger? ‘Good! Real good!’ Well I am sorry, Mrs. MacenBurger but we’ll have to see what Santa Claus has to say about that! Or did you mean: really well?”

Den has no idea what she is talking about, but he cannot help himself and a smile breaks onto his lips.

Finally, she gives up waiting a response. “Never mind. You English have no sense of humor.” She winks. “There are no adverbs. But I need to talk to you about your project.”

“You got my message then?”

“I did.”

“Have you looked at the contracts?”

“I have.”

He waits for more. “So? Don’t keep me in suspense.”

She sighs. “You can’t do it.”

“Can’t do what?”

“You can’t take on these side projects, disclosing information that is gathered in connection with the others.”

She looks at his smart wall, that displays his refined causation chart. He has tidied it up and added pictures of Cathy Kim and the Senator to remind himself that they are people.

“Can we share information, legally, with these American law enforcement people.”

“Is she really law enforcement?”

“Yes. No. . . I don’t think so.”

“What about our Non-Disclosure Agreements?”

“Is that her? Very nice. . .” She whistles and nudges him irritatingly. “Our commitment is clear. We are supposed to generate billboard content and story-lines for the game scenarios. We are not supposed to divulge our research to third parties.”

“Are they really third parties though? I mean the Senator is part of the consortium, as I understand it. And Kim. . .”

“Your fancy woman.”

“What?”

“Sorry. Your law enforcement researcher. . . what is she really?”

“Well, I haven’t checked her out fully. . .”

She smirks. “Really? You must be slipping, Denny.”

“We would obviously have to do that.”

“Obviously,” she nods, turning her head slightly to view him through the corner of her eyes..

“But if she is a legitimate part of the consortium, by contract, then what?”

“Well it would depend on what kind of contract.”

“But if she is working in their best interests?”

“I’m afraid that would not be a precise enough criterion for their lawyers.”

“So you don’t think it is doable?”

Kylie McLachlan’s humorous facade wavers.

“Den. . .”

“Ms McLachlan?”

She sighs, showing frustration. “I think you must be a little crazy to take on this thing in the first place.”

“Really. Is that a professional opinion? I didn’t know you had been studying psychiatry.”

“Oh, you’d be surprised what we legal people have to know.. But all this goes just a little beyond advertising, don’t you think?”

“It’s a natural progression. It’s excellent money. It is not something that I could say no to easily. If I had said no, we could have been dropped like a hot potato. The end of our contract and we might never be able to get back into it again. Not only the end of our contract but the end of our business. The future of advertising is in the game.”

“So you let them push you around and pull your strings?”

“I did some pushing,” he protests. “I pushed.”

“That’s not the kind of pushing I was thinking of,” she chides. “I know you too well, Den.”

He ignores the innuendo. “I just thought that, it’s better to have their trust and to be on the inside than on the outside. If we are working with them, we can influence the direction of things. If we are on the outside, we are completely at their mercy. I don’t like being in that situation.”

“So you were merely working undercover. I see. Well done, Mr. Bond. Of course, you realize that you have just likened their behaviour to just one more of these American gangs. Isn’t that where most of them hang out, along the Mexican border?”

“Kyl. . .”

“Den, wake up. You might have gone there with the intention of securing our future, but they seem to be using that over-willingness to wrap you around their little finger. Who is really in charge?”

He stares out of the window at his tree. Many of its larger branches are now gone. What is left is a knobbly trunk of stumps.

“I was invited to play a special role. That’s all. What they are suggesting is not something illegal or anything.”

“It’s invading people’s recreational space with zombie juice, that’s what it is.”

For the first time, since he has known her, Den thinks that she looks genuinely upset.

“Look at it this way: we are just helping them to maintain the American dream.”

“Ah, the American dream. Fine. Say no more. Well, we’re very sorry to disappoint you, Captain America – you see, here in Great Britain we don’t have a dream. That’s because we are actually awake.”

“So, you are not keen then,” he inflects with a little irony.

“The consortium is a well-defined entity, Den. Even if one of its members wanted to ask you for services outside of the scope of the agreement, it would be dodgy. America is litigation central. You don’t want to mess with that kind of thing.”

“Well, they are going to come back to me. It will be difficult to go back on this now. That much is certain. I think they now view us as the experts in this area.”

“And you think we could handle it, even if it were legal?”

“Yes, I do. I think it puts us in the driving seat. If we are on the inside, then we can take charge in our own way. After all, we will be the one’s with access to the billboards.”

“Just as well.”

“Why?”

“Because it is probably going to be a pile of trouble for us.”

“So what should I do?”

“Well. We’ll need some kind of policy for dealing with this senator friend of yours. You realize that, here in the U.K. you could be thrown in prison under the official secrets act for saying anything that the government doesn’t like. It isn’t like in the U.S. where they have freedom of speech and information, you know.”

“Maybe that is why they are keen for a British company to be involved?”

“Now we’re approaching the truth perhaps. The British government are involved in this too?”

“They have links to the consortium, I think.”

“We need to be very careful.”

Den looks suddenly downcast. What seems like a good idea suddenly seems more like the rope that will hang him.

“And I thought I was onto something.”

“More like someone.” She winces. “Sorry – I have to stop that. Bad habit.”

Her expression softens and resumes its playfulness. She has beautiful, lively green eyes, he thinks. She steps forward and takes his fingers and hand and pulls him towards the door.

“Come on,” she says. “I’ll buy you a bad Italian coffee around the corner and you’ll tell me more about what actually happened in the land of two for the price of one.”

He withdraws his hand and nods.

*

Kylie McLachlan plays with the foam on her cappuccino. The little coffee shop is arty but cramped; it is starting to thin out after a post lunch-time burst of activity. The air smells of fresh coffee and chocolate, and the gurgling hiss of the espresso machine forces them to speak more loudly than they would like. Den pulls at a croissant and eats as she speaks.

“Hawshaw’s a sweet old man who has had dealings with my family for years.” Her face becomes strangely calm, when she is not joking. Den likes it. Her eyes like pools of water. “He used to deal in jewellery until gold became the symbol of the gang culture. When it changed from a symbol of overt wealth to one of intellectual poverty, he decided that it was no longer something he could deal in.”

She stirs the foam.

“He died last year. Just before then, he told me that you should never sacrifice principles for the common will. He found the idea vulgar. Noble ideas come from individuals with strong messages, not weak instincts that are programmed into our biology. Strong messages emerge from the chaos of a melting pot of minds and build a consensus against the odds. They win by natural selection, because they are better than the alternatives.”

“Fine philosophy.”

“He died for it.”

Den takes a sip of his own blend. “I wonder if anyone can afford to keep to principles like that in this day and age?”

“What makes you think they can’t?”

“Too many pressures.”

“Pressures?”

“Politics of production.”

A trace of a smile waxes then wanes. “Oh ye man-folk of little backbone.”

"I'm serious. We are constantly under pressure today. It's the economics of our time. Back in the days of Queen Victoria, you could perhaps have had some lofty ambitions about building a better world, but now it's more cut-throat than that."

"Oh that's nonsense. I'm serious too," she counters. "And I'm not sure that it was not even more cut-throat in Victoria's day."

"Everything is about production goals now. The numbers are more important than the results. Quality is measured as throughput."

"Time is money. It was always a rather simplistic equation."

"But we believe it more these days."

"That's a pretty weak excuse." She puts on a stern expression. "What kind of a man do you claim to be, Den Morris?"

"Sorry, I left my sporran by the vanity mirror."

"Really? How interesting." She grins. "But you know something? I'm not sure anyone was ever encouraged to stand up to anyone else, not in history, not now. If you are going to make a stand on principles then you have to do it without the sanction of your proverbial 'times'. That's just the sad lament of the wicked."

Den stuffs a piece of croissant into his mouth to avoid having to reply.

"That's where dear old Mr. Hawshaw was a hero. I tend to think that the strong characters of history have always been the ones who were just crazy enough to defy common lore and stick to their guns like that. None of them had their lives made easier by making the choices that they made, but somehow they traded practical discomfort for an equivalent mental anguish. Though they do tend to be revered posthumously rather than by their peers, which is unfortunate."

"Mary Queen of Scots?"

"Speaking of cut-throat."

"That's not a very comforting thought."

"You might be right, but come on. Maybe that's exactly our problem these days: too much comfort. We're not used to getting our hands dirty, not willing to take chances anymore. The pain threshold is lower. Everything is too safe, too controlled." She shakes her hands in mock fear. "We never even try to swim upstream because we can't dial it up on our mobile."

"Is that what you think I'm being asked to do? Go with the flow?"

"Isn't that what marketing is about? Creating a flow to go with?"

"Partly, I suppose."

"Seems to me that these cronies from Washington have created a flow of their own, with the meeting you attended, and they sucked you right in, with a little rattling of the bling bling."

"I don't think of myself as a gangster yet."

"Glad to hear it, Den Morris. Wi'or'wi'out yarr sporran."

Den smiles.

"There, that's better."

"What?"

"A smile."

"I'm a little ray of sunshine."

"Do you good to laugh a little more. You always were a rather serious man, Den Morris."

"Me?"

"Oh, not so?"

"I have no idea what you're talking about."

"We see it you know," she says.

"Sorry?"

"We see the change."

His face is a question mark.

"In society. I have a friend who is a barrister, working on criminal law. He's a bit older than I am. He says that people do not have the same concept of right and wrong as they used to."

"Doesn't every generation say that?"

"Possibly, but it is not always objectively true."

"And he thinks it is true now? Why?"

"It's because we have everything we want. You and I are criminals. The law does not have daily consequences for us, so we tend to ignore it, try its limits. In the past you would have had to rely more on others around you. That's what makes society work, and the law was made to reflect that cooperation. Today, your little gadgets make you invincible and you don't have to think of the well-being of anyone except your nearest and dearest. And if you should want for something, you can just order it take-away from your wristband."

"So you think people are weak?"

"It's not just that. They are not just weak, they are unable to appreciate the law. Why should you agree to be nice to anyone else, when you can have anything you want at the push of a button?"

"You are a misunderstood genius, Kyl."

"Why thank you, sir," she struts. "Then, have I ever told you that you are a handsome man, and just a little sweet?"

"Now, that sounds a lot like me," he agrees. "It's my ragged, unshaven charm."

"Something like that."

Den looks at his wristband, stretches back and rubs that back of his neck. "I could do with a swim."

"Why not? Off you go then."

"Want to join me?"

"Oh no. Not unless you talking about a quick one behind the bike shed?"

"Ah. Is that how you do it in the law courts?"

"Every chance we get."

"Well not this time. I should really be getting back. This thing is buzzing away. . ." He lifts and rattles his mobile wristband.

"Me too. Come on then."

She rises up, pulling her skirt down a little as she extricates herself from the tables and chair of the little coffee shop. Den follows.

They step out into the whining of the London Open Air Experience. It is slightly quieter now, but the sound is more irritating. Den is still old enough that he remembers the days before compulsory electrification of the inner-city traffic, when the rumbling of petrol and diesel engines was the sound of the city purring.

He puts his arm around Kylie McLachlan as they walk the hundred metres back to Grapevine.

"You're worried about our complicity in something unethical?" he comments as they walk.

She nods slightly. "It's not so much the ethics. You can debate that, but I am worried about the complicity in something criminal."

"This is congress and Interpol. They are the law."

"Oh yes! Go Sylvester!"

"I don't see that we are complicit by fulfilling a contract, if it comes to that."

"If it comes to something in writing, we are at least on firmer ground."

"Did you see TIME?"

"I don't read magazines much."

"Never mind. I'll try to get something in writing."

"If it's legit, they shouldn't mind."

"I sort of have the feeling that's not the way it's supposed to be done here," he says. "It feels as though it should be a gentleman's agreement."

"Well, without wanting to sound like a rabid feminist. I would say that gentlemen's agreements are just a nice way of saying rampant corruption."

Den does not reply.

"But I can try to call some friends and ask them to put out feelers?"

"To check out the legality?"

"To check out the people, first. Do either of us really know who these people are?"

"I got Mary to pull me a bunch of stuff on Cathy Kim."

"Is that what you call safe sex?"

"Just wanted to know who she was. She seemed legitimate."

"Well, that kind of thing can easily be faked."

They come to the Grapevine entrance and McLachlan stops..

She checks a list of contacts. "I could do some checking. I've got Arjan Latifi. He is quite new to me, but he knows a lot about government dealings in the E.U.. He might be able to help us. I can get Sanihje to call him up for lunch. She's a sweetie."

"Aaron Oxley came by and asked after you, by the way."

"Me? Now what would he want?" She sighs.

"You coming back up?"

She shakes her head. "Have to be somewhere."

"All right. See you then."

She winks at him. "Yeah. Fuck you later, handsome."

29

A fluffy white face is peering at her through the brambles and branches. Vibe is exhausted and shaken, but the sheep seems unconcerned of her plight. It is merely curious as to what the hell she is doing there in such a stupid place. Well, she thinks, if sheep have managed to get here, this must be about the stupidest place to be. You can always trust sheep to get themselves into the biggest trouble.

She feels herself beginning to tire. At least she is out of reach of her pursuers. It is unlikely that they can hear her from up there. She has the aural camouflage of wind and water to hide her.

The fear has passed, but she is as taut as the branch she is holding onto. If she removes a hand, she will surely fall.

It reminds her dismally of a rock-climbing experience, when she was hanging on in a freezing wind with fingers she could barely feel. She was not even certain that her cold body could move fast enough to save her if she moved, so she petrified in that position until someone tightened a rope. But there is no rope here to catch her.

The sheep seems to lose interest in her, obviously she is not entertaining enough. She needs to do something soon.

The mud beneath her seems to have packed since she stopped moving, and her elbow is well dug in. She feels some purchase at her hip, and risks drawing her knees up to her stomach. The extra strain on the branch makes it give a little,

and she stops. Another adrenalin flood knocks her slightly senseless, and she has to pause. She tries again, and this time manages to bring her boots up to the edge of the ledge, so that all of her is on approximately solid ground. Now, if she can somehow pack the mud underneath her, to get enough friction to press with her calves, she could release one hand and try to get out of her backpack, which is pinning her down.

The branch gives and she recoils. Her legs brake her slightly, but not enough and she is catapulted uncontrollably backwards, and slides over the edge.

*

When she comes to her senses, Vibe is incredulous to find that she has not moved more than half a metre. Her backpack is snagged on a branch and it now pins her, on her side, hanging just over the edge of the ledge. So all that time hanging on had been a waste of strength. Now she is exhausted and just as trapped as before.

She risks straining forward to look over the edge. It's not that far down to more slope, but she would have hurt herself had she fallen uncontrolled. She reviews her options. At least she now has her hands free. Her backside is wedge uncomfortably on a rock at the edge. If she releases the backpack straps, it should be possible to get out of it. Then, if she falls, at least she stands a chance of landing properly. What the hell.

She undoes the waist strap, feeling the relief of pressure there, and then carefully twists her upper arm out of the shoulder strap. It sears at her hip, with all her body weight supported by the friction of her hip and buttock, but it feels solid enough to roll onto her stomach and clutch at grass and shrubs with her hands. She is out.

She drags her backpack free and clambers carefully down the remaining incline to another rocky trail. Best to sit here for a moment and recover her state of mind.

"Are you okay?" A voice calls, something between a call and a whisper. She hears the rustling of a jacket running towards her.

Vibe looks around and sees a middle aged man in dark blue waterproofs clambering over the terrain towards her.

"Are you Sara Stensrud?"

She starts and a flood of adrenalin whitens the world. "How do. . ."

"About time too," he says. "Wait a minute."

He wriggles something in his gloves.

"Frank? Checkpoint three. We've found Sara."

She stares at him. He does not look dangerous. He does not look like someone who would threaten her.

"I'm with the local police. Why didn't you report in sooner?"

She looks glum.

"Are you hurt?"

"I don't think so."

"You had a bit of a slide. You could have broken something."

She nods.

"We thought perhaps you had had an accident or were in trouble."

"As it happens. . .not until you came."

Sceptical regard taints her welcome start.

"Sorry. I didn't mean it like that."

"You could have ruined our operation."

"Your operation?"

He sighs, and pulls his hood off, looking around. Lowering his voice again, he says: "Haven't you been paying attention? We have a situation here. There are gangs roaming around. We are still trying to round up the remainders. They can still be dangerous."

She chews her lip and gives him sad puppy eyes. Best not to say anything for now.

Ten minutes pass before Frank clambers into view.

"Hello again," he says, panting.

"Hi."

"You okay? Heard you had a fall. . ."

"I'm okay."

"Told you we should have walked together."

She curls her lip.

"You didn't find your friends, I take it?"

She shakes her head marginally. "I had this idea, and got distracted. I thought I could finish my work. So I never made it to Leirvassbu and didn't find them. I'm headed there now."

"Not now you're not."

"We'd better get you to the road," the other says.

"The road?"

"There's a patrol car waiting. But we'll have to wait a while. We have a straggler coming this way."

"But I have to get to Leirvassbu."

"No way, not now. You'll have to come with us along the valley."

"But..! I have a meeting I have to get to."

"Sorry. That's out of the question now," the other man says.

A surge of rage and tantrum threatens to surface in her. She recognizes it and breathes slowly to let it pass.

"I was headed towards the cabin. I am supposed to be staying there with a private group for a few days."

"We can't let you spoil our operation. Anyway, it will be winter any day soon. You shouldn't really be up here alone anyway. It's not safe."

"That's why I need to finish my work. If I could only find the team. . ."

"Hang on – we're on. Here he comes. We have his mobile signal. He should be line of sight now. Better get down and look as though you are having a hiking break."

"Is that who was following me?"

"Our straggler. You saw him?"

"There was someone behind me. I could see him from up there. Maybe a kilometre behind me. I didn't know who it was. I was taking the high road to stay dry and avoid the bushes."

"So why did you come down here?"

"I thought. . ."

They wait for her.

"I saw this other person up ahead and . . . it spooked me."

"Why?"

She shrugs. Now is not the time to be telling them about Lindgren's bizarre message. Stupid girl. "What makes you think he'll come down here?"

"We don't know. We have someone up there too. That's probably who you saw."

She nods.

"There are still two more that we haven't located yet."

"Wait, I have an idea."

They look at her quizzically.

"Maybe I can help?"

A message comes in; they do not have time to respond.

"Wait – Finn has him in sight. Top road. We're okay – just stay out of sight and keep quiet."

She purses her lips.

Quietly, he says: "We'll have to walk along the valley before we can get onto a trail where we can use transport. From there we can take you to the lensman's office."

"Will I be allowed to come back up here and work again afterwards?"

"Can't say."

"But my work?"

"Safety first."

Vibe flicks through the settings on her mobile.

"What's that beeping?"

Shit. She looks more sheepish than the sheep she was staring at. "Something I was supposed to do earlier. I have a form to send."

"Sounds like its mandatory. Mountain rescue?"

She nods. "Maybe I should just send it."

"Maybe you should."

She smiles or grimaces, as if to say "sorry" with her teeth and pushes the button. They will probably hang her for this, in some appropriate country, after she has been sentenced to hard labour for most of her life.

Some how things look bleak. Her body feels the bleakness. She feels . . . bleak.

Vibe wearily pulls up the positions of the VeiVeks, while they are waiting, and sees that they are still heading towards a few main cabins, close to the main mountain road. It looks as though the French want to collect them and do a runner. They are retrieving them and pulling out – without any consultation or consideration. That was not the arrangement they were supposed to have. Betrayal. Not merely bleakness, but mutiny.

They wait in tense silence for several long minutes. Then they hear a crack.

"That's it. He's down."

"You shot him?" She looks shocked.

"Tranquilizer dart."

"Elephant juice."

Whatever kind of idiots the hooligans might be, the idea of death close by is more than she wants to experience.

"Oh."

"We might shoot bad buys in our spare time," Frank says, waving his finger at her mobile interface, "but in the real world, it costs too much".

"Now we just have to do something with the body. The helicopter is too far away. We'll have to package him and walk him out of here, unless he gives us trouble."

"That means we'll be off soon."

"But that means I can go to Leirvassbu now. It must be the closest point to the road for any of us?"

"But we don't know where the others are. We haven't searched that way yet."

"So isn't it a good time to do it?"

"We need to join Finn up there on the higher trail."

"Okay, let's gather our things. Are you okay, Sara?"

She stares at him without answering him either verbally or non-verbally. "What if I could help you to find the last gang members?"

Smiles broaden their sunshine faces. "Oh no you don't."

"But I have a network of little spies up here, with their own network, and they have been little magnets for these assholes already."

They look at one another. “Don’t see what you could do.”

“Track them down for starters.”

“How?”

“I could start by asking them the last time they encountered someone. They are programmed to register the passing hikers – it’s our way of searching for intelligent life in the national park.”

“Well, I think we can agree that that discounts finding any of our targets,” says the local policeman.

“But you could see where there has been activity. It might give you a search area.”

“Okay – tell us.”

“So I can stay?”

“I doubt it. No promises.”

“Tell us what you know first, and then we’ll talk about it.”

Vibe nods. “Don’t suppose you have anything to drink? I’m freezing.”

“Put some layers on and keep warm. Then follow me down to the main checkpoint. You need to keep moving or you’ll stiffen up.”

*

Vibe calls out to her little babies. She feels like some kind of goddess, sending out her summons across the lands. Hark subjects! Your lady calls. Little sparks of electromagnetic sermon hail the moist air in the mountain valley.

Her coverage is not as good as before. She has lost contact with about a third of them. Some must have moved out of range. That would never have happened without the interference of The Adversary. Part of the Mars programming they are testing out is to prevent them from moving too far apart for too long, so that they do not lose contact with one another. Otherwise they could lose their way, or lose one another. They should be small and numerous, and the general helpers should bind the experts together. There are no geosynchronous satellites around Mars to join them together, or to send them a positioning signal. The infiltrators of the God of War can not rely on an umbilical.

Probably her panicked French team-mates, if that is indeed what she ought to call them, have long since overridden such concerns. She needs line of sight between all the VeiVeks for communications to work in an ad hoc relay mode. Now that the transmitter is gone, there is no centralized relay point. Trying to talk to them is essentially like spreading rumours. Say, have you seen X? Don’t know, I can only see Y and Z, I’ll ask them. Can’t see anyone else right now.

So then: she looses her magic arrow and starts the communion. Go, Quicksilver, seek and report from the Eastern front! Coz I gotta know, yeah, I really gotta know. Yeah, baby.

Vibe maps the command program into her specs and blackens the lenses to cut out the daylight. It will be quicker if she can tie into her VR interface. She can watch the picture build up and go straight to the relevant data. It's all there. She has been working on this for some time.

Signals rush out across the marsh, reflect from the bare rock and return from the stark edges of the valley. Speak to me, with many voices. Tell me of what you know.

The first few answer quickly. The closest is perhaps a kilometre away, based on the timing. At that distance, this will cost her her batteries. She should not stay on too long. But it will be worth it. She is logging all of the data she receives from the little robots whenever she can. It can all be analyzed later. Just keep it safe from the Adversary.

So, into the First.

—Greetings lady, I bid you welcome.

—Tell me what you know, my subject.

—Ah, what can I say? I hear the hissing of the sun and stars in these microwave ears. All is quiet here until your great voice hailed me to your service.

—Good, good, little friend. Tell me of any others.

—Ah, the eyes that last I saw in kind: my neighbour. Let me relay you to him.

—Stand still friend. Let me stand on your giant shoulders that I might see farther. And you, tell me subject, who have you seen?

—Greetings lady, I am the second. I have seen more. Not two hours past, I observed a temperature anomaly – the tinge of warm flesh – and a seismic tremor – the thumping of boots on the hard ground. The signal of a communications beacon lit my world, thundering against the song of sun and stars. I present you its captured ID as my humble offering.

The communion continues and is over within a matter of seconds. The positions of the little robots have not altered significantly. They cannot move very quickly across the terrain, even with their advanced power sources. She can still reach a few of them, but the others are in shadow of the mountains somewhere. She can talk to five of her babies from this point. But that has already revealed useful information.

The sensor logs for tourist encounters mostly date from several days ago. None of the VeiVeks along the valley has seen anyone for some time, except for the second to answer. That is what one would expect from a mountain that has been forcibly quiescent. The VeiVeks she met a few days ago have moved out of range. She can just read one behind her. She sees that it has been attacked with paint-balls, but that was several days ago.

Vibe feels uplifting satisfaction at her own ability to see. This proves perhaps that the VeiVeks can be useful in the mountains, in search and rescue operations,

even here on Earth. They have not been able to test this before, but she understands the significance of the result. And she will save the evidence for her thesis.

She saves the mobile ID inside a note and makes it ready for passing on to Frank and his friend. She pulls off the glasses and packs them carefully into her backpack.

In the distance, she hears the stomping of someone approaching. She rotates her upper body and feels the numbness of her backside, on the cold rock. Frank is coming.

“Get anything?”

“Actually, yes.”

“Really?”

“Are you impressed?” She grins.

He nods. “If it’s true. It would be great.”

“Why wouldn’t it be true?”

“Ah, sorry. I didn’t mean it quite like that.”

His friend comes too, a little older, a little more jaded. “You have to tell us what you found first. Then we can decide if it’s a lead we can use.”

“Okay.” She pulls off her wrist strap and flattens it out across her knee. “Are you ready to receive some data? I can send it broadcast.”

“Ugh, I’m not sure we can accept data from civilians. . .”

“Yes we can,” Frank shows him. “Just go to Receive Evidence and open a sandbox.”

“Okay.”

Don’t they train these monkeys to use their bananas? Vibe thinks.

“Okay – ready to receive.”

She transmits on short-range. A map and a mobile ID on the person she detected.

“The sighting is a couple of hours old, so that gives you a search area, I guess.”

“We could check it out.”

“It’s not that far away.”

Frank grins. “I can check where the ’copter is.”

The other nods.

“How many more do we have to find?”

“Based on the original surveillance, two more. It would be a big plus if we could locate them quickly. We could ask the boss.”

Switch on the Voice That Gets You What You Want. “You know, if the helicopter could give me a ride, I could contact all my babies much more quickly from the air. . . The trouble is that the mountains shield my signal, and the range is limited.”

“Your babies?”

“Robots.”

“Right.”

The officers’ eyes question one another, attempting to switch their minds to comprehension and trust. Busy day, too much to process. Cold and damp. The thought lingers, broken off by a nod. “I suppose I can ask. Let me see if I can reach the command car.” The other wags a lingering nod and moves off to make a call.

Frank risks a prototypical smile. “So you’re going to save us?”

She shrugs. “I’ll do what I can.”

He smiles and steps away over the stones, leaving her standing there, sending her a look without even looking at her. She feels it burning into her humility. Shy boy. He likes her.

Goddamn you, Peter Green. Why can’t you rescue me from my agony? Why is she still hanging on to that idea?

Her rear end plops down onto a stone, half in a huff and half in exhaustion. Around her, sheer tonnage of rock impresses its stature on the land. She feels as though she could be transformed into this landscape, if she remains here. She is small and weak and tired. Eggs lake. Head hurts.

For a moment she forgets even the mobile that clasps her body with its technopathic tethers. She could dial comfort and understanding in a heartbeat, but she just feels weary.

After a short recess, the other comes back.

“Sara!”

“Yeah.”

“Tap in to this call.”

She surfaces and touches her tie-in sequence. An image appear in her glasses. It seems to be from within the command car. Some police officer.

“Sara Stensrud?”

“That’s me.”

“My name is detective sergeant Myhre. I hear you want to help us.”

“If I can.”

“You have some kind of robots with cameras.”

“Not exactly, more like sensors. But they are designed to detect people.”

“And you think you can find our stragglers?”

She nods. “Maybe.”

“The officer says you need the chopper?”

“It would give me better access to my robots. We are in communications shadow. They only have a short range ad hoc net right now. Someone took away our relay transmitter.”

“Tell me about these robots.”

She draws a slow breath. "It's a research project, it's registered. Look it up."

"I already have. I see a mountain watcher project."

"That's part of it."

"I'm checking your ID but I cannot see that you are registered with this mountain watcher project. . ."

"I should be there, but I am not a primary team member. That's just the French and the Americans. . ."

"No, I can't see anything here. Wait a minute."

The line goes dead for a second and then cuts back in.

"All right, we found you. A Sara Vibeke Stensrud."

"C'est moi."

"All right. They tell me that you have possibly identified the location of the stragglers."

"I have a probable sighting."

"We are checking it out now."

"Cool."

"If it checks out, we might be interested in your information."

"Okay."

"I suggest that you listen carefully to these officers and do as you're told."

She nods, but does not say anything. She is expecting an earful, but it doesn't come.

"If they can have seen anyone, they can tell me. That allows you to either eliminate some areas or pin-point when and where they were."

"All right, let's give it a try."

"Could you tell me something?"

"Yes?"

"Is there a Peter Green registered with the current team?"

"I don't know. Is there a problem?"

"Good question. Never mind."

"All right, I'll leave you in the hand of the duty officers." He cuts out.

The other says: "Okay, let's get moving. Can you walk okay?"

"I think so."

"Good. Then we should get started before you stiffen up."

*

"Mamma, it's me."

"Hello, stranger. How's your trip?"

"Ahh. Next question."

"Is anything wrong?"

She explains.

"And you're stuck without access to your work? I'm so sorry, honey. How frustrating!"

"Actually, they want me to help them catch some low life football hooligans that are surfing on your taxes."

"Sounds important."

"I want to work on my project."

"If they are asking you to help, it's quite a compliment. You should be proud."

"But it's not my job."

"Don't pass up an opportunity to do a good deed, Sara. It might be old-fashioned, but it's something to live by."

"What about my degree?"

"Your degree can wait. What happens in the real world is more important. Besides, in my experience any experience is good experience. It will all help you in the end."

"Right."

"Take care, little one."

"Wish I could talk to dad."

"Me too."

*

A helicopter comes. Spiralling air lifts them into a place of open clarity. The rocks lose their sharpness and she fades away from nature into an urban dullness that haunts the inside the cabin. Civilization has intruded into her escape. It feels like a disappointment.

The girl is weary, dizzy and nauseous. The helicopter ride seems to be wrenching at her body, speaking differently to her skin and to her guts. She feels out of synch, out of place. The dizziness seems to extend to a sharp pain in her ears, which slides down a tense muscle to her throat. Everything feels wrong.

Even as she sits, the world becomes greyer and more hostile. Colours are losing their flavours, and sounds only hurt. She feels as a bucket of water must feel in the hands of a running window-cleaner. She only hopes that he does not fall off his ladder.

"So what can you see?" a voice says.

They are talking to her. She would turn to face the voice, but the disorientation presides over her faculties. A recollection of looking for people surfaces and she looks down at her mobile. There it is, a little larger and heavier than usual. Or is it her hands that are larger?

"Sara?"

She focuses on the mobile. The interface is alive; she knows what to do, and yet her body is sluggish and unresponsive.

“Sara? Are you okay?”

A map of the mountains appears and she sees the remnants of her little tribe of babies. They are a rag-tag bunch now, barely cooperating — just fleeing the scene, like rats responding to a rogue harlequin. All she can think of is how she has been betrayed by the research team and how she will no longer be able to complete her research. The reason is no longer important. It is only the knowledge of it that matters.

The helicopter makes a turn, swinging them around, slopping soapy water out of her bucket. She feels a shiver through her very soul.

“Sara?”

“Yes?”

“You don’t look very well. Try to concentrate on the mountains.”

“I’m . . . okay.”

But something tells her that she is not. She is not even sure why, she only knows that she would like to go to sleep.

The world falls away as they pass over a mountain. She attempts to connect to her babies once again. She can see a few more now, but they seem to be spinning around and her hands are too big to work the controls of her mobile.

I am sick, she thinks. This is what it is like to be sick. As a child she can recall lying in bed with a feverish mirage before her – like a galaxy of swirling dust, full of pins and needles, rotating in front of her. An astral shield, keeping her in her bed. If she tried to rise, it would push her down again. It was a frightening experience then, now she can feel the same sensations returning, as if some old ghost from a childish nightmare has returned to taunt her.

“Sara, look at me.”.

There is that voice again. Why can’t she turn her head? Is it the dream where she is paralyzed? Is she asleep now?

She feels a growing fear, an anxiety. Something is wrong. It is not possible to put a finger on what it is. It is simply growing like a culture of disease, eating into her. The only thing she can remember is that she is going to fail her doctorate, that her work is doomed and that they are after her. When they catch her it is going to be bad. She needs to run, but that is not going to happen any time soon.

Sleep is what she needs.

Sleep.

As metal blades lunge at the frozen air beyond their cocoon, the sound of conquered sky thunders above her; emptiness felled by the whirling blade. It tramples her senses into oblivious denial.

And, without her realizing it, darkness comes.

30

The pitter-pattering of wintery rain splashes onto his window. It is hypnotic, distracting. It is as though nature is trying to gain his attention, trying to communicate with him in Morse code.

What is it trying to say?

You must be crazy, Dermot? What a loser Dermot?

His combo beeps the arrival of new mail. All around him, little streams of communication are pleading with his senses, vying for his attention. Look at *me*!

He shakes his head free of its involuntary ruminations and looks for his tea. He is beginning to get a headache and tea is high in salicylic salts; it is natural aspirin. He flicks his kettle on in preparation.

Beyond his window, silver birches are waving a muted dance as they cling precariously onto balding foliage. Something metal clanks loudly, blown over in a gust of wind and penetrates the sound barrier. It is at times like this that Dermot feels safest, viewing the world from behind a glass membrane, in warm denial of its chilly bite. He browses forth some classical music and finds new energy from his glance though the pane.

What is he doing here anyway? He has seldom felt so out of place. He ought to be working on Bishop's project. Why did he ever agree to it? That's easy to answer: because he is weak. He cannot say no, but he cannot just do it either.

And Bishop trusts him to do it. That makes him feel a little bad, but then he more or less forced it on him. Make me a pathogen, Dermot. Where are the ethics? There are players all over the game who have paid to kill and maim and be lawless, and he wants to tell them all that they are morally bankrupt and that they should all hail the police as the saviours of society? Why should he be the one to trick them? It's dishonest.

On the other hand, he can see a certain sense to it. He cannot stand violence in the real world—outside the game. People are getting dangerous now. Like those Nazi assholes. There are bad people all over.

They've got grievers messing up their game scenarios in the sims to pot—but that is not the same thing as having the evangelical churches manipulate the games for their own gain. That's brainwashing. And what was the latest thing he heard? The Russian mafia moving in on the technology for extortion purposes? Christ. He doesn't know what to think, and he doesn't know what to do.

So why don't I just do as I'm told?

Maybe because he doesn't know whose judgement to trust. I *am* a loser, he thinks. Won't listen, won't do, just mind my own business. And that means nothing. I don't have any business. I'm just a kid. A stupid juvenile. That means I just hide when I don't know what to do.

He makes his tea and slurps its hot essence down a dry throat. Back to the window.

The ground outside is now a slushy mixture of melting snow. Not long ago this was a delicate whip of pure white crystals. Now the crust at the roadside is a black cement of car emissions, dirt and water. The janitor has tried to make little piles of leaves, neatly placed into object-oriented piles. What is the point of making these attempts at keeping order? The wind keeps on messing them up. Even the household waste is neatly separated into metal, glass, organic. . . but people are too lazy to check properly. It gets mixed.

Law and order for leaves? It doesn't work.

He senses a sigh forming, deep inside his being. Better suppress that. There is not sense in crying over things that can't be controlled. Force majeure, act of god. There is no point in having a law unless you can enforce it. It costs to enforce order.

It's all a waste of time. It's a jungle out there.

They can't keep anything separated: not out there, not in here. The failure is not in the objects, he thinks but in the operations and channels between them. The forces that link them together. . .

Hey, wait. The channels. Maybe that's it.

Mind returns to the programming task. The game is just as complicated as the world outside. It's just that when things go crazy, they call it an error instead of an act of god. And he is the janitor of the Lord of the game, cleaning up these little fragile piles of leaves and blow around in such a storm.

What a loser, Dermot.

All right. Integration of the objects is the key to stability. That means that every prehistoric XML pipe between them is a potential point of failure. But does that mean that isolation, separatism, objectization is fundamentally the source of the error? No. That is just housekeeping. The interrelationships are the key to stability. That is where the problem is. Small services are fine with lightweight coordination.

He feels a surge of satisfaction at the insight.

Then there is this other thing. They have adopted such a rigid object model for programming that it is inflexible. You just can't do that. You can't backtrack either, they've spent way too much time investing in this model. It would cost too much time and money. If they are going to change anything here, some other approach will be needed. Something like social engineering.

The ways that modern programs are written, with their closed architecture, standardized objects means that every game in the world will now inherit the same class of methods. Infiltrating game software with cheap subliminal rendering tricks is now trivial. Before you know what has happened, entertainment is not the main channel for mind control.

That is what the Indian girl said essentially: they cannot fix the problems of the game easily because it would mean change for everyone. Everything is controlled from one place. A house of cards built on a sturdy but bad idea.

Weary of the triviality of his options, Dermot puts the coding problem aside. He figures that he will sort it out tomorrow now. The crucial insight has been made; that is enough to put his mind at rest.

On the desk, a copy of TIME magazine is lying opened at a significant page. He has been meaning to read that article for some time now — it is the story that blew open the rumours of the U.S. government's involvement in the game. He should read it. Bishop gave it to him. He was supposed to read it, to convince him of the usefulness of what they are doing. Little does he understand yet that he is wasting his time on a misfit.

I don't even care, he realizes. Bishop's arguments are all well and good, but Dermot is not in the right place to invest emotional currency in a faceless problem of supernatural proportions. Soon, it will be his compulsory day at the crime centre once again. It pays well, but his heart is not in it. There seem to be more pressing matters for him to deal with: like getting his life sorted, like getting laid, maybe even just getting high once. All this Christian propaganda business seems just a little above his head.

Can it really be as important as they are making it out to be? It's like talking about the end of the world or something. Wouldn't they have seen some kind of sign?

And then there is the girl. He is not sure what to make of this girl, Prima or whatever her name is. She is smart, there's no doubt about that, but she has the feeling of someone self-taught who doesn't quite know the right things to say. On the other hand, that's cool though. And she's pretty. Very pretty. But not exactly his type.

Loser, Dermot.

As for the others. They mainly notice him when he cannot deliver on time, or if he is absent or sick. Even his father, whom he tried to visit once, treated him like a ghost. Receiving him was more of a duty to be dispatched than a caring. Once he went to visit the old man after promising to visit for a long time. When he finally arrived his father sat him immediately down at the kitchen table where a single place was set and presented him with an overcooked dinner plate. One knife, one fork and burned chicken. Then he announced that he was going out to meet a friend and would be back in a couple of hours.

It is probably his own fault. He has never been very good at fitting in. Well, it's too late now, unfortunately.

*

Bishop. Now there's a strange kettle of fish. The other day, Dermot heard him talking on his mobile, in the office down the hall, audio only. It was as though a different person had crawled out of him, ripping the latex mask from his face.

"Hi Cato."

"Ed."

"How's Treena, the kids?"

"She's fine. They're all fine."

"What's it been now? Twenty-five years?"

"Something like that."

"Got your health?"

"I'm all right. Not so bad. How about you?"

A married man. Bishop is a married man. He has lived with, probably slept with, a woman for twenty-five years. They have kids. Is this the same man? If envy were a reaction to shattered illusion, it would flow out of him. Instead, Dermot feels shame and humility. It is so far from his life. It is what everyone was supposed to do in those days, maybe even now. When was it that people stopped getting together like that?

"I suppose you big-wigs are all busy up there?"

"Always busy, yes."

As the conversation scraped to a close, arrested by its own friction, Dermot walked up the hall to look at Bishop—just to check that it really is him. Bishop usually broadcasts an outward authority. There, in that moment, he was simply small, an ordinary man. He saw Dermot looking, nodded, and went back to his business.

Dermot prefers not think about his childhood. All he can really remember is being disinterested in other kids and their families. His family was always distant. It suited him just fine.

*

Henrik walks by his desk in the open office landscape, dressed in purple tights and a yellow corduroy jacket. His showy office-mate dresses up as a different person each day. Some bizarre game of his own with role playing. He probably has some serious personality conflict.

The girl is just a child. What can she possibly know that we don't?

How to be a child?

What instinct knows, that canned conformity has not shut out. Freedom of spirit? Fearless adventure?

Should I go on?

Henrik says: “No one you meet is ever who they seem to be. When the aliens sent their robots so that they wouldn’t be exposed to danger. We misunderstood. We thought that’s what the aliens looked like.”

Right.

The phone rings again. He cannot recall when he had had so many calls in such a short space of time. He is not normally a centre of attention.

“Hi. This is Christina. I don’t know if you remember me, but we met on the tube.”

He starts.

And stops.

And recalls the slight girl, with a smart, slim skirt and shoulder length blond hair, who had deigned to speak to him. She seemed nervous, even fearful. Her fear had made him feel almost confident, as though he had had an advantage over her—a woman—for once in his life.

“I remember!” he says. “Good to hear from you.” (But why are you calling a loser like me?) “I never thought you’d call.” No don’t say that. It sounds pathetic. Shit. Fuck!

“I thought maybe you could help me with my combo. You know, you said you did computer stuff.”

Dermot listens, incredulous. She is asking him to help her with a computer. That is about the only thing in the world that he knows something about—where he might actually have something to offer her.

“Your combo? What’s wrong with it?”

“It sort of stopped working. I was in a room chatting and it just packed in. It was pretty embarrassing. I was in the middle of this really hot conversation.”

He thanks as many gods as he can remember.

“The name on the doorbell is Grorud. There’s no first name. Make sure you hold it in for a while. I might not hear it.”

“Okay.”

“See you.” She hangs up.

He is left staring into space. His heart is pounding faster than the last time he rode his bike up to the forest. He begins to regret the burgers he has been knocking back in the last couple of weeks since the project shifted up a notch. Shit! The project . . . He really needs to work on debugging this code.

He toys with the idea of calling her back, but then he realizes that he cannot call her back. She has his number, but he does not have hers.

Bishop’s ghost haunts him. “Dermot, have to step up the pace of our counter-operation. My sources are saying that there is going to be a major intelligence

operation in the game within a couple of weeks.”

“I’m kind of busy right now.”

“Dermot, look at me. This is not a time to be busy.”

Something sinks inside him. Bishop looks stern. He is not his usual congenial self. It must be something important. But what has it got to do with him? No one made him saviour of the world.

“We all have to contribute here, Dermot. I’m relying on you.”

The words chill him. Bishop is relying on him? but he forced him into this in the first place. Who said this was his responsibility? Here I am just trying to live my life, and you come in here bossing me around like you have some kind of authority. What you don’t realize is that I’m just an ordinary person, not some superhero. You can’t expect everyone to care about this stupid political agenda.

“Okay,” he says. “Will do.” The feeling in his torso tells him that he has no real intention of trying to comply with the request. For a moment, this dishonesty disturbs him, but on momentary reflection he resigns to it and pigeon-holes the worry into the usual slot. Basically he is an unreliable loser. He knows it, and everyone else knows it. He doesn’t need Bishop to rub his nose in it. He is not about to spend time stressing over this problem.

He suppresses the emotion. He cannot cope with all of his weaknesses. So push it under the rug and let someone else deal with it. He has done it so many times before.

*

It is getting dark early now. He emerges from the cinema some time later. As he walks through the centre he feels self-conscious. This is the heart of the red-light district.

Suddenly he turns, staring sharply into an alley. For a moment he is certain that he has seen a couple having sex there, in the snow. Is he mistaken? He stares into damp vapour. There is nothing there.

He finds her flat in a side street unworthy of mention in one of the older parts of town. From the directions she gave him, he has to walk up and down the street a couple of times to find the entrance to the block. The buildings are not numbered very well here.

He finds a small staircase leading up from the street to a sheltered porch with a panel of door buzzers. This is not the classiest of places. The names are all written by hand on bits of sticky labels that are several layers thick. He finds one that says Grorud, but checks the others in case there are several. It is not exactly an uncommon name. There seem to be no others so he pushes the button. As he pushes the button for a second time, a small voice says, “Yes?”

“It’s me – Dermot,” he says uncomfortably into the metal grill.

There is a pause. "Oh yeah. Come to the end of the first floor."

The door opener buzzes and he fumbles with the old reinforced glass door. It wouldn't stop a thief, he thinks. Its wooden frame is almost rotten. It has probably been there since the 1970s judging from the style. The quality of the lock is not much to write home about either; he could probably have pushed it open without her consent, but who cares? He should not be judgemental about her living conditions. After all, she had looked pretty demure when he met her on the tram.

He enters the building and paces down a long corridor, past an elevator and stairwell, that reminds him of a hospital. It is utterly featureless in the corridor. The doors look like the kind of cardboard doors they use in public buildings, all identical and free of decoration. They have a thin veneer of fake wood on them, but he knows that they are just paper thin. Each door has a little round peep hole to inspect callers.

As he reaches the end of the corridor, the last door pushes open. It opens outwards. Strange, he thinks. It is almost as though this really were a hospital once. Or maybe an old people's home. He waits for her to open it, but it just opens a crack. After a moment he knocks and pulls the door cautiously wider. There is no one there, but a small voice says "Come in".

Dermot steps inside, his heart beating faster again. There is too much blood in his head now. He starts to feel dizzy and he cannot quite focus. Looking through the small entrance wardrobe, he sees her sitting on a sofa in front of the TV. The room is messy and stinks of some kind of smoke. It looks as though no one has cleaned here for weeks or more. There are toys on the floor. A child has been here. The room is thick with old stale air.

She stands up nonchalantly as he enters and smiles coyly. She is beautiful, he thinks, but she has that tired look about her, like someone who smokes and does drugs. She is skinny. He likes that too.

"I wasn't sure if you'd come," she says. She does not look at him as she says the words, instead she walks to a small kitchen and starts routing around in some old dishes for cups. He watches her thin body move in a pair of light blue jeans and narrow black polo-neck. The clothes look old, but they reveal her small breast and buttocks and her long thin legs. He cannot help from looking at her. She is perfect.

"I said I would," he manages.

"I don't get many visitors," she says. "Shall I make tea? I think I have some. It's probably still all right."

He nods. "Yes, please. Tea's fine."

She nods without emotion, acknowledging that now she has to wash two cups from the pile of plates and crockery in her kitchen sink. She rattles around for a while and he hears a kettle start to roar.

He starts to look around as she works. The TV is showing some kind of junk show. He doesn't bother to look at it. The remote control is placed strategically on the arm of the sofa where she was sitting. She has a single shelf with some old books and what looks like a bedroom dressing table with a computer combo on it. It looks old, probably five years old. He cannot remember having seen anything like it for what seems like ages.

He scans the room. On one wall she has two small black and white pictures of what look like death-metal bands. Someone in the pictures looks a bit like her. She turns and hangs in the kitchen doorway, watching him look around without ever really looking at him. She does not smile or show any kind of emotion. He wonders if she is taking something now.

"Is that you?"

She shuffles into the room, glancing at him briefly for the first time and smiles slightly without opening her lips.

"I used to hang with them."

Dermot's musical taste has always been quite heavy. He oscillates between dark classical motifs like Shostakovich or Honegger and heavy rock bands. But these guys look more hard core than he would normally listen to. They have this whole death thing going on.

"I used to hang out in that crowd before I moved here."

"On crosses?" he says, "Like Jesus?"

She laughs, or almost. There was at least a smile there for a moment that seemed genuine. Dermot feels immediately more at ease, pleased with himself for making a joke.

"You moved? Where from?"

"Up North. I would hang out with this band, get stoned. It was about the only thing worth doing there." She points to one of the painted faces adorned with straight black hair. "He was the bass player. They used to have me in the room when they were practising."

Dermot feels instantly a pang of envy. He cannot imagine what it must be like to meet people like this. He imagines that it must be dangerous. There must be something wrong with people like that, right? "So he was your boyfriend?" he mutters, trying to sound as though he doesn't care.

"We used to fuck"

He nods, fighting a bolt of panic, unnerved by a word which looms too largely in his mind. He fumbles to continue his nonchalance. "So. . .what happened?"

"He left me cause I was a bitch." She says it with almost complete dispassion, an even lack of emotion. She puffs on her cigarette. Dermot has hardly ever seen a cigarette before, except in old movies. He is not quite sure what to say now.

"Doesn't that make you sad? No regrets?"

She shrugs.

"So you need a new boyfriend then," he jokes, fishing for information.

She shrugs and inhales long and hard on the cigarette, wincing, almost as though in pain.

"Or a lover? Everyone needs someone."

"Not me." She stares out of the window. The suddenly, she seems to tire of the subject and goes over to the combo and switches it on.

"This is what happens," she says simply.

Dermot watches the screen. It starts to light up, changing colour a couple of times and then suddenly it stops.

Controller Error.

No kidding, Dermot thinks.

"Probably some kind of memory error," he says.

She looks at him expectantly.

"I only use it for VR. I like the chat rooms. I like flirting with men, making them horny."

Dermot reels, trying focus on the combo while his mind is pressing him to focus on her behind. He uses a special key combination to flip the combo into debug mode and starts it up again. She watches him without apparent interest, but with an almost judgemental dispassion. She is watching how he performs, he thinks. I am a lab rat.

He wonders if she really wants him to fix it, or whether this was just a reason for making contact. In spite of her demure look, she seems reclusive and lonely. It makes him like her instantly, but there is something a bit odd about her. Under different circumstances he might have walked away, but she is fascinating, almost exotic.

She turns suddenly and goes into the kitchen. After a moment she brings back tea, puts it onto the coffee table and sits down in front of the TV as though he is no longer there.

He fiddles with the combo for a while longer to make sure there is not something trivial wrong then, seeing that she is no longer interested, gives in. "I don't think I can do anything with this now," he says, not really sure that she cares anymore. "But I might be able to find something at work."

"Doesn't matter. I just thought you might know."

Dermot feels puzzled but dares not show it. Her difficulty almost puts him at ease. She is way weirder than he is. He is just dull, but she is . . . messed up somehow. Obviously something has made her this way. He is intrigued and entranced by her pale beauty. Ensnared.

There is only a single two seater sofa, so he sits down beside her. "Is this mine?"

She nods, still not making eye contact. "Sugar?" She points to a bag pushed into a half-dead pot plant on the table.

"No. It's fine."

He sits back in the sofa. It is a little too soft and a little too narrow so that he feels as though he is lying next to her. His leg brushes against hers.

"So you probably have a girlfriend."

The big question. It is embarrassing to answer.

"No. Not right now." *Not ever dick head.* He feels a sinking feeling at the acknowledgement.

"Oh. Why not?"

He flounders. "I work too hard I suppose. Don't get out enough."

Now she seems almost interested for a brief instant. "I got fired today," she says matter of factly. "I'm not very good with work. Can't keep a job." He tries to make a connection for a moment and then thinks better of it. "I spend too much time on VR. It was great. We could be in there for hours while we were handling calls at the call centre. I only wanted the job so that I could use their combos. The boss caught us and warned us about it twice, me and the girl I worked with. He only fired me though."

Dermot examines her critically now. Is there anything going on in her head? he wonders. She could be in a different world, mailing telegrams to him. He is not even sure if he is really communicating with her. Perhaps she is a robot. Does this qualify as a Turing test? Matter of factly, she adds: "Sometimes I think it's time I got a lover." She takes a puff of her cigarette and winces. "I don't like that word." She seems to taste it in her mouth, "I don't want a boyfriend. Just, you know, someone to have sex with. That would be okay. No commitments. That would keep people off my back. It's embarrassing not having a boyfriend. People keep asking. You know."

He stares at her, trying not to look at her small breasts, and the long skinny legs inside her jeans. He imagines what her body is like under there. Ribs and bones, but soft skin. He imagines feeling her shoulder length blond-bleached hair in his fingers. He imagines what it would be like. . . He feels a pressure in his groin and his breath grows short, and feels suddenly off-guard. "Right", he says, feeling suddenly uncomfortable.

Is she asking him? Or asking him to ask her? He hardly feels as though he has connected with her and she springs this on him. It seems way too implausible, but what a prize. Something about her face seems soft and vulnerable. He wants to reach out to her. He moves to put a hand briefly and comfortably on her knee but she sees it coming and stands up, pretending to want something from her kitchen. His heart sinks, fooled by expectation. When she comes back she sits on a small wooden chair on the opposite side of the coffee table.

Dermot feels a sudden panic. The desire to escape. He says, "So I should be going soon."

"Okay," she says and gets up immediately, as though this is what she had been waiting for all along. She starts rummaging through a jacket. "I need to buy cigarettes."

He gets up, carefully, conscious of the visibility of his desire, and trying to hide it. If she notices, she doesn't let on.

"So, I'll see you around then," he pleads, embarrassed by his own desperation, knowing full well that the chances of it are remote. "I'll let you know if I can get hold of something at work."

At this, she intrigues him by smiling shyly, as though flattered. "Really?"

"Yeah. . .I'd like that."

"That would be nice."

She grabs an old-style payment card that was lying on the table and a key, presumably to the door and users him out into the hallway.

"We can go this way," she says, taking the opposite direction to the way he arrived. "It's quicker." Down a short staircase to a second door. He pushes it open. "Oh wait, I forgot something. So I'll maybe see you then." She smiles briefly and turns to go back. Suddenly, Dermot is dispatched into the darkness, not knowing exactly what happened.

31

Jonas has cancelled his meeting and taken a taxi to the police station. Martin is trailing in toe, hanging onto his hand. He feels flustered and anxious.

"Do you have any idea how many calls like this we hear about these days?"

"Are you saying they're common?"

"I'm not saying that the threats are not serious, but this is a widespread problem. It's not yours in particular."

"So you think this is just a crank call?"

"It's hard to say."

"But I was shot at!"

The duty officer is calm and matter-of-fact. "It's not pleasant for you I would think, but I don't see what we can do. Still, I think it's best to err on the side of caution."

Jonas snorts. "Right. Of course, but is there nothing you can do about it? Can't you find out who it's from?"

"I doubt it. I can't see anything in the call logs. The call is registered from an anonymous Internet location, not from a registered mobile ID. That means we can't find out who really sent it."

"Why is that even possible?" Jonas exclaims in exasperation.

The officer on duty wrinkles his brow. "Good question. Freedom of the Internet. They don't think about the police when they make these contraptions."

Jonas is looking for advice. "So what now? What should I do? I have to figure out what to tell his mother."

"Best advice I can give is to watch your back. We'll make a note of your ID and set up a panic button on your mobile." He works at his console behind the clear barrier, manipulating something. "That way the net will monitor you and you have a short-cut to assistance."

Jonas stares at nothing through a furrowed brow. Why, of all days, does this have to happen now?

The officer points a sort of wand at him. "There, you should see a police icon on your display. It will remain there for a week. After that time you must either renew it by checking in with us, or let it go."

Jonas nods, stroking the hair on Martin's sleepy head. This has been an exhausting morning for both of them. Martin has barely said a word all morning.

"Let us know if there are any further developments. Apart from that, we just have to wait and see."

Resignation sinks in; he turns to leave but stops short of the exit. He goes back.

"Can't you tell me something about the group?"

The officer is already doing something else, but replies cheerfully as he types away. "Most likely the Russian mob, but it's hard to say."

What?! "The mob? Why would they be interested in me?"

"Don't be surprised. They have a hand in most things. Wherever they see an opportunity to gain power or influence. Used to be sex and drugs, but other things have grown in importance."

Nausea pervades Jonas' mid-regions. He cannot remember having been scared before. Not like this. Anxiety, he is no stranger to, but fear? Is it real? Isn't that the point of fear? You don't know if the threat is real?

"Look, go though that exit over there and I'll get you a lift. Go somewhere indoors and lay low for a while."

Jonas leaves the police station with his new mobile identity. The old ID will be located at the police station and calls will be relayed to him. It will take them some time for anyone to track him down again by mobile, at least, and if they try the police will know. Now he just has to watch his back. As long as he has Martin with him, he is an easy target.

They promised to keep an eye out for Sara too. Jonas has already done his best to keep her safe and warn her of the call. Now he has other things to take care of.

He pulls up his contacts and dials Kaja.

No answer.

So he redials. Joe. Joe might help.

“Joe? It’s Jonas here.”

“Good to hear from you again so soon, Jonas.”

“Do you have a minute?”

“For you, you dog? Never,” he quips.

“I’ll take that as a yes. Something kind of serious has come up for me. I was wondering if I could ask you a favour.”

“Serious? Of course.”

“Could you come down to my office and look after Martin for me for an hour or two? I’ll fill you in on the details when you get here.”

“Me?”

“I need someone I can trust. Short notice.”

“You sound . . . stressed out. Is everything okay?”

“Not really. Do you have time? I know I’m asking a lot.”

“Let me get back to you in a few minutes.”

“Thanks.”

*

Catching a lift with a commando patrol is an excellent adventure for a child of Martin’s age. They depart the police complex, in a patrol car with darkened windows, and head towards the reality that awaits him at the Research Council offices. The ride lends him a moment to himself, to consider what he will say to Kaja when he mans himself up to the task. She is predisposed to go ballistic with far less provocation. The lack of a good answer leaves his head spinning.

Riding through traffic is slow. There are few routes for cars in the city these days. The command car makes a few short cuts through pedestrian streets. The town is busy now. That feels safe, he thinks. Safety in numbers.

As they arrive at the main street, a gang of youths is parading in flock, flaunting football colours. It is an ugly sight, Jonas thinks, the revival of the pack instinct—opportunistic mayhem and animal affectations. At least they are spared

the marching bands that appear around the May celebrations, for the time being, and the teenage school leavers with their big red busses blasting music to the four corners, discovering sex and alcohol for the first time. At least it's only thoughtless barbarism. Fuck.

Perhaps the rain will wash them away. In these winter months, you have to be fairly hard core to march down a street or hang out on a corner, simply to show your allegiance or defiance, or whatever the hell it is they are trying to show. Is there any connection between these and the hooligans Sara mentioned?

Sara. How is she doing?

They glide through the town, stopping at lights and pausing at the plethora of new roundabouts. It seems detached from the world in patrol car, as though they are really watching society on TV, or in a VR game. How do the police relate to the people when they are so isolated? Silly question: how does anyone relate to one other, when they are all in a world of their own?

They pass fake statues in the square by the theatre. Some sage soul has deemed it important to make copies of the Vigeland monument statues as part of an exhibition which has yet to be cleared up: a cheap copy of a petrification of human spirit: little figures all reaching up in hope, or perhaps exasperation, to the heavens. If only such perfection of form were really a symbol of the human condition.

In truth we are just fighting off the weeds in an overgrown, blighted vegetable patch, he thinks.

*

The car deposits them at the rotating door of the Research council. Some light snow has fallen and the steps are slippery. Jonas carries Martin under his arm, up the steps and through the rotating portal.

"Mr. Lindgren, they are waiting for you in meeting room four."

Fabulous.

"All right, I'll be there as soon as I can."

He sets Martin down and pulls him gently to the elevator. He needs to install Martin in his office before he can join any meetings, or catch up on his messages.

He sees on his wristband that Joe has called back and apologized for not being able to come. Some kid with a crisis of his own to deal with. Jonas is sympathetic. That is going to make the day harder.

Ejected from the elevator, they meander their way along the hallway. It requires some effort to have the patience for a child under the circumstances. He pushes into his office and finds it a mess. Martin follows him in and runs to the window to look out. A dark thought chills him.

"Martin! I think we'd better keep away from the window today."

The boy turns to look at him, comprehending the message, but he does not move. Jonas pulls him away and takes out some colouring books, some crayons and a few mind-games to play with. He makes a space for him in the corner of the room, where he has a small coffee table. Martin likes to look in the books that Jonas keeps here – especially the ones with mathematical formulae in them. Jonas finds an old book that he can leaf through and places it within reach.

Before he can orient himself, two colleagues knock and push into his office, circumspectly, glancing only momentarily at Martin. They look upset. Mari Roness and Atle Alnes: their faces are a study in anxiety.

“Jonas, have you heard about the meeting?” Roness says, without waiting for an invitation.

Jonas shakes his head. “Something important came up.”

“Well, you had better know then.”

“Know what?”

“Things have been happening this morning while you were away.”

“What things?”

“They revoked next year’s proposal from the council board.”

“Who did?”

“The ministry,” Alnes adds.

“What?”

There is nodding. They exchange significant looks.

“The ministry wants to override our plan for the coming year?”

“They already have done.”

“How can they. . .”

“All our plans for the year are now forfeit.”

“How did this happen?”

“We were outvoted by a single vote on the board.”

He struggles to comprehend. “But, weren’t we all agreed?”

“We were, but I think someone has been spreading rumours behind the scenes. You know Skagen is a puppet for the ministry.”

“Skagen did this?”

“The little creep.”

“Great. I turn my back for a moment. . .”

“This is bad news, Jonas. They are laughing at us.”

“They are not the only ones. The whole of the research community is going to be laughing at us, and hopping mad.”

“We’ll take the brunt of it.”

“Where’s John?”

“Who?”

“The intern. English guy. He was going to attend for me, in case there were any questions to be answered.”

“But he can’t vote for you?”

“I realize that.”

“I haven’t seen him. Maybe he is still in the meeting. I think they are still talking about other stuff.”

“This is outrageous.”

“We never stood a chance you know. It was decided high up at the last minute.”

“We have spent months figuring out these allocations. All the work in reviewing the proposals, all the time spent. . .”

“You don’t have to convince us.”

He feels himself boiling. “What the hell is the point of wasting our time carrying out this whole rigmarole procedure if they never had any intention of letting us decide?”

“Keeping up the appearance of democracy?”

“What democracy?” he stabs.

His mobile announces an incoming call from the reception. He juggles with whether to take the call or ignore it. He has only sent his new mobile ID to a few key contacts, but this is not quite the time for just anyone to call. He buries it.

“This little pin-prick with a tight collar, from the ministry, came up here and started telling us that there is a crisis taking place in world opinion.”

“What the hell is that supposed to mean?”

His combo registers an incoming message. Jonas kills the sound.

“It means that we have to divert funds to approved charities to be perceived as a good Christian nation by the U.S..”

“By the U.S.?”

“Who else? The U.S. is claiming that they are going to start selecting their collaborative grants more carefully, so as to only work with so-called decent Christian countries. It is part of the Moral Campaign Against Terror.”

Martin is tugging at his arm, always quiet, but wanting attention.

“What is it, tiger?”

He whispers in Jonas’ ear.

“Ah, sorry, pal. You just sit tight here, and I’ll be back in a little while.” He beckons the others out of the office.

“Sorry, he doesn’t like it when we get agitated. Daddy’s supposed to be the calm one.”

They translate their conversation to the hall space: a small group of seats next to a shelf of journals.

“What were we saying? So the ministry is saying what?”

“America. Christian countries.”

“Right. So, is that us or not us?”

“Well, his argument goes roughly like this. The failure of the E.U. to ratify the Christian State has blackened Europe’s name in Congress, so they are turning to the most Christian countries and bypassing the parliament. Scandinavia has a large evangelist community. . .so. . .”

“Religious means evangelist, pretty much.”

“And that means. . .”

“That we have to be in America’s good books, so we have to make a strong commitment to support an openly Christian project.”

“The famine relief?”

“Research is not a religious calling,” Roness says ironically. “You can’t sell knowledge to moralists.”

“Meaning what? That we cannot spend money on actual research if we want to be in their good books? It sounds like an excuse to keep the rest of the world behind competitively, if you ask me.”

“There’s probably a hundred ways to interpret it. The bottom line is that we are being steam-rolled by the ministry.”

“And they just spring this on us today?”

“Just today.”

Jonas’ mobile announces another call. It is from Kaja.

“Damn.” He throws the others a glance. “I have to take this, can I talk to you later?”

He rises and goes back into his office. A incoming memo has arrived, in the folder, right next to his panic button. Sara has been asking for help again, but he simply doesn’t have time to talk to her directly, or figure out what is going on with the embassy.

He accepts the call. “Kaja?”

“Yes? I saw that you called.”

“I’ve been trying to call you for hours.”

“I was busy. You know that I am at work.”

“I know, but something has come up.”

He hears her voice quality change, as an edge of hostility enters. “And you are going to tell me that you have something more important to do than my work?”

“No, that isn’t what. . .”

“What did the doctor say?”

“The doctor?”

“That doctor? That you were supposed to. . .”

“Ah.”

“Jonas! Didn’t you take him to the doctor? You were supposed to take your son to the doctor!”

Shit. “Sorry, Kaja. Something happened and it wasn’t possible.”

“My god, Jonas. What is wrong with you?”

“I know it . . .”
 “Can’t I ask you to do even a simple thing?”
 “Something more important came up. We need to talk about it.”
 “What could possibly be more important than your son?”
 “Nothing, and that’s why I can’t have him with me. Is there any way your mother could look after him today?”
 “My mother?”
 “We should get him out of the town.”
 “What are you talking about, Jonas?”
 “I might have to leave the city. Could we take him to your mother’s?”
 “Why? I just asked you to do a simple thing. Why can’t you just do as I ask?
 I can’t leave work, you know I can’t”
 “I could take him myself, if you would call. . .”
 “I could lose my job.”
 “We really need to take him somewhere safe.”
 “What are you talking about? If you were a little more. . .”
 “Kaja, please listen to me.”
 “I am tired of listening to your whining. This time you are just going to have to look after him. I have work, and I have plans. . .”
 “What plans? Look, Kaja, this is important.” So she is going out? With whom?
 “I am important, Jonas. I am a human being. You might not want to have a life, but I certainly do.”
 “Wait, you didn’t say anything about going out tonight.”
 “I don’t have to tell you about my plans.”
 “What about me?”
 “What about you? We are broken up, don’t you remember?”
 How could I forget. “So, you never even. . .”
 “What?”
 “All this was to get me to baby-sit Martin because you are going out? He isn’t really sick at all, right? This was your idea.” He winces, seeing Martin pretending not to listen in the corner of the room.
 “I ask you to do a simple thing. . .”
 “So who are you seeing? No, don’t tell me I don’t want to know.”
 “I wouldn’t tell you even if you asked.”
 He attempts to wrench himself back from pyrotechnics. “Fine. Look, Kaja, something odd happened today that is important.”
 “Jonas, how many times do I have to say it. It is your turn. I don’t care what you have on your plate today. I am also important and you are going to be a father to your child.”
 “Kaja, please listen.”

“Don’t you dare make me come over there and get him, Jonas!” She exudes something between a growl and a scream and terminates the call.

Silence. Embarrassment in front of his child.

He reels momentarily at her rebuttal, though he is well used to these by now. With a little transcendental meditation and some deep breaths, he will be back in play. Breathe deeply. Breathe.

What bothers him the most is that, in the whole of their interaction, he did not manage to communicate a single piece of important information.

Stress pursues him, he believes, like a predator.

*

Jonas has a poem that helps him to calm down. Something he learned as a child. It helps him to recite it, to focus on the words.

Astronomy is 1derful
And interesting 2
The ear3volves around the sun
And makes a year 4 you
The moon affects the sur5 heard
By law of phy6 great
It’s 7 when the stars so bright
Do nightly scintill8
If watchful providence be9
With good intentions fraught
Should not keep up her watch divine
We soon should come to 0 (nought).

The verse is old. He believes it comes from the early part of the twentieth century. It reminds him of a more innocent age: an age in which topics like knowledge and astronomy were viewed differently: as fanciful escapist concepts, for a world that was interested in playing with ideas—a world that respected science and mathematics. There are no politics in the verse. It is pure and clean. It is about cleverness and goodness, not hidden agendas or deception.

How did science reach this sorry state of affairs? When did politics become more important than creativity? He looks at Martin and wonders whether his innocent interest in books that he cannot understand is fundamentally misplaced, in this age. That kind of innocence belongs to a less cynical time.

So what are we going to do, you and I?

Jonas looks at his mobile, wondering who he can call, or what it can do for him to get him out of this mess. How much we rely on this thing. How useless it seems now. He ought to take Martin out of town. It was a stupid idea to come

here, the most obvious place to find him. He starts to pack some things. They can stay at a hotel

It is at times like this he wishes they still had their baby-sitter. When Martin was younger, and he and Kaja were still a couple, they would try to get out, to keep the romance alive. They had a sitter then. He liked their baby-sitter; she was a round, red-faced woman, in the process of shedding middle age. She was full of life and good humour. She kept them in good spirits. She lived out of the centre of town.

Every Thursday evening they would pick up Martin from the sitter and plan to go out for dinner to a restaurant where he could play in a special adventure pen. They always asked the sitter if she would join them.

“Lill—you can join us, if you like,” he would say, but she would always decline.

He remembers her cheerful ruddiness. “No—you kids go ahead. I have these menopausal flushes, I’m afraid, loves. There’s no way I can be out. Sweat like a pig. Drives me crazy. Off you go now!”

She was hindered by hormones, simply chemicals without malice — surely a better fate to be than to be hindered by a brain-dead bureaucracy that knows full well what it is doing. He would pay her double now, if she were still sitting. Then he could put Martin somewhere safe and try to sort things out here. He cannot just run away from his responsibilities.

He looks through his messages. Little advertisement billboards shift and change on the display. There are some notes about Sara’s funding, some internal memos and an anonymous message, routed from his old ID. *‘We will give you one week to provide us with the information we need. We have located the girl. We are watching you.’*

He feels a chill, in spite of the reassurances by the police..

And Kaja will be dating someone, probably surrendering her beauty to someone he does not even know. He feels a surge of anger or panic, something indefinable. He remembers the noise she made before cutting their call; he wants to repeat it.

Who can imagine how Martin must be feeling right now, to be abandoned like this by his mother. She is a perfect product of the modern age: self-centred and incapable of doing wrong. She has tricked him into being her baby-sitter, and now even unwittingly exposed him to danger.

He considers ripping the mobile out of his clothes. Suddenly this part of him seems like a tumour – a malignancy that has grafted itself onto his body and opened him to a slow degenerative disease. The temptation is strong, but who can do without one? Soon, even Martin will have to have one of his own.

He watches his child, wanting to go over and hug him, but not wanting to interrupt his play; he seems happy, in a world of his own. He is reading about

ancient Egypt and drawing, absorbed in the colour images. He does not need computer animated antics to satisfy any need for stimulation. He does not seem concerned with whatever he perceives is going on around him today. So trusting. Jonas envies him that level of detachment. What he would give to go back to that time of innocence, that feeling of safety and wonder. Things change though, don't they?

The chapter title in his book triggers a memory of his own growing up: Tut Ankh Amon. The name that kept changing. As a child it was just Tooten Karmen – or even Rootin Tootin Karmen. Then suddenly, at some indefinable moment, the word Anhk became apparent to him, in the blur of sounds. He learned about the Ankh symbol. He learned its meaning of freedom. Then he learned the word Amon, a king. And then there were three words: the transformation was complete. He would never hear the sounds with the same ignorance and innocence again. How does one express what that change meant? It was a time of ambivalence: a feeling of enrichment, combined with a feeling of loss.

That process of learning is going away now, he realizes. Society is no longer interested in those details. As long as you can fake it, you're accepted.

He looks at the clock on his wall panel. It is almost 15:30. If they are going to get out of the city, he should leave now.

The door pushes open again. "Jonas, we need to talk."

Roness enters again.

"I'm a bit short on time right now."

"It's important. They want to put a stop to all expenditure on current projects. That means that hundreds of stipends and fellowships will be frozen."

"Can anything else go wrong today?"

"Don't jinx it."

"But they cannot just stop those monies, surely. Isn't it illegal?"

"They have made the terms so complicated that no one is sure, to be honest. We will have to consult lawyers."

"Can we move some funds to safety for emergencies?"

She raises an eyebrow.

"All right, stupid question."

"I just heard that I will have to re-apply for funds that I have already received."

"Re-apply?"

"The ministry has overridden the decision of the funding committee. They have enforced a political agenda, apparently based on this business of Christian politics."

"That's terrible."

"I can think of another word."

"What can we do?"

"I would suggest moving to another country, but they are all the same now. The system has become corrupt."

"Everywhere."

"We have to fight them at their own game."

"I don't know. What are we going to do, bribe people in the ministry?"

"Why not. When you work in a system this complex, low level corruption becomes a survival tool – an act of rebellion against the bureaucracy."

He laughs, uncertain whether to take the idea seriously.

"That's half of it – something we need to discuss seriously here as a matter of policy. I don't think we should accept this decision without a fight."

"How can we stop it?"

"We could strike? I don't know—there are things we could do."

"Strike?" That is a thought he has not considered before.

"Think about it." She sees that he is collecting his things together. "Are you leaving?"

"Uh, yes. Something important has come up with Martin here. I have to leave."

"Will you be at the Social Science Seminar tomorrow?"

"Is that tomorrow?" He snorts. "Of course it is. That's out of town somewhere, if I recall. Sundvolden?"

"It was moved. Just past Holmenkollen."

"Really? How are you getting there?"

"There's a bus or the Tube. Atle might be taking a car."

"Right. Yes. Actually that suits me very well. But I'll have to bring Martin with me."

"I don't suppose anyone will mind. Sweet child." She winks at him, but he is not looking.

"Good, then we can talk some more there."

"What's the other half?"

"Excuse me?"

"You said that civil disobedience was only half the story."

"Oh. It was on the news. Some high level programmer has been kidnapped in Slovenia. Some kind of Russian hacker collective has been trying to track him down."

"Slovenia?"

"A lot of programming houses. It was apparently motivated by game-related conflicts spilling over into the real world."

"People have some funny ideas about this game."

"Police channels have issued an alert to American civilians. The American embassy has shut down after threats of reprisals, in connection with the leaked story."

"Really? That might explain a few things. Have they known about it a long time?"

"The kidnap is new, but apparently they have been receiving threats every since the damn broke."

And now we're all damn broke, he thinks. A voice call comes in on his combo. Internal.

"All right – I'll see you tomorrow."

She nods and leaves.

He accepts the call. "Hello, Mr. Lindgren."

"Hi."

"We spoke earlier, about the funds for your student. I thought I had better let you know that the problem is now moot. I'm afraid that the funds have now been frozen by executive order. To gain access to them, you will have to re-apply for coverage under a new environmental program."

News travels fast. "So I heard."

"Do you want me to start the procedure?"

"I suppose you better had."

"Okay. I'll come back to you with details later."

"Bye."

He sighs. "Martin, come on, pal. We have to leave."

*

He ushers Martin into the elevator. They will have to walk to the car rental or get a taxi to make it to the hotel where the conference will take place. It is the perfect place to hide out. Kaja can reach him, if she needs to, and she can go to hell if she doesn't like it.

He pushes the button and they descend towards the main entrance. The doors seem to take forever to close, the controls are sluggish and worn. The glass-metal box falls down to the main reception.

His mobile beeps on the internal channel: a message from reception. "Mr Lindgren. I have a visitor for you. A foreign gentleman. He is waiting here. Is it all right if I send him up?"

The words arrest time for him as they unfold in his consciousness. Jonas' heart explodes. Panic strikes him. In his mind, he sees a man in a raincoat with a silenced weapon waiting to catch them in their brief trip in and out of the research council offices. The man brandishes his weapon openly and scowls at him with a dark shadow of a beard. His eyes spell danger. He aims the weapon and a woman screams.

Jonas wrenches himself from the vision and hits the button for the next floor, to stop the lift from descending, but it is too late; the lift has already passed it

and refuses to obey his will. A part of his mind tells him to reach for his mobile armband. The interface is active and it displays a panic button to call for help, as a bright police logo. His muscles tense to perform the act, but before he is able to muster a response, the carriage clunks to a halt and the doors jerk open.

They are presented with the open area of the reception, bared to its space. It is quiet and apparently empty.

Light races along his line of sight, starting from the receptionist's desk and impinging on his retina like a meteor shot from the heart of fate. The receptionist sees him, from the corner of her eye, and starts to turn. Her eyes meet his and he tries to mouth words that will shape the situation, but it is too late for that. His mind has flooded with reptilian flight, and although his racing heart has stretched the moment into an epoch, he is unable to take advantage of the chemical acceleration.

"Ah, there he is," the receptionist exclaims.

Jonas feels a paradox of paralysis overcome him, his legs numbed into inactivity, his mind wiped out by a bright light. He perceives a tall raincoat turn swiftly from a shelf of brochures and the figure's eyes meet his. "Jonas!"

Joe.

Only now does he breathe deeply, and in gasping breaths; he feels his heart hammering painfully in his chest, and his body fights to overcome the flood of chemicals it has unleashed into his brain.

Joe walks towards him. "I managed to get away, and thought I had better come." He regards him with concern. "Are you all right, Jonas? You looks pale."

"Joe."

"Hey Martin, how are you doing? Are you leaving?"

"Yes. I don't think we should stay here." He sees that Joe is dry. "How did you get here?"

"I have my car just up the road."

"Good. Can you give us a lift? I can explain on the way."

He nods. "Come on."

32

All night Deli. 02:00 a.m.

"Next!"

"Eh yes, I wonder if you can help me."

"Special offer on Sacharillos if you buy with one of these Colas."

"No. Look, I dropped my tablet outside and it came apart."

Shrug. "Noodles with chicken, ready to go."

"I've seen my brother put one back together once. Do you know how to do it?"

"Ketil, help over here!"

"What is it?"

"Girl's dropped her tablet."

"All right, Miss. We have SonySamsung in the back. I can do a special deal on a Sonerika 5000. Some others coming in on Monday."

"No. Can't someone just put it back together again? I've seen someone do it before. I dropped it and these bits fell out, but I don't know where they should go."

"You'd need to take it to an authorized dealer. We don't do that kind of thing."

Sigh. "Where?"

"I don't know. Go and enroll at Tech School."

"Next!"

33

Preeta's first days with the team have been dull but restful. She could easily become accustomed to this life of pampering, of tolerance. They seem to show

her respect beyond what is due to her. Perhaps they are fools. Whatever the reason, she is not ungrateful.

They assign her credit for things that she was merely doing as part of her job. She is no hero. She is no genius. She is a conduit for other's thoughts and ideas. She is a dumb runaway girl who has never been able to fit in. But it doesn't matter, because most importantly, she is a survivor. She survives by going with the flow, wherever it might take her, and then living off the new land she discovers.

It has always been like that. No reason to stop now. Maybe one day, if she ever settles somewhere and becomes happy, if she ever feels safe, then she will discover who she really is—not just who someone else wants her to be.

Will that be here? Who cares. She's still young. There are still places to go and people to meet. And here? So far, she has felt closest to the woman at the tram stop. One cannot say that the average person on the street has been friendly.

Yesterday, she ventured out and stepped into the path of two men walking along the street. She smiled at them, innocently enough, and mumbled "Hello". The one on the left glared at her and stopped in his tracks.

"Do you know me, lady?"

Preeta is shocked and said nothing.

"Do you know me?"

"No, I don't know you."

"Let me tell you! You don't want to know me, lady! You don't want to know me! So what's it to you?"

As she continued on her way, another face, pock marked and grey, almost like a corpse was framed in her absent stare. He looked old and young at the same time. She has seen thin people, but never one that looked so sick.

"This is the edge," he said.

"The edge?"

"Grensen. The final frontier. Give me some money?"

She shook her head. Here? In Europe? In India, she might have considered it, in Malaysia, she would have frowned, but here in the centre of Western perfection it seems like an obscenity.

"Look, I just want a beer okay? What the hell is wrong with you?"

"Sorry."

Adjusting to life here will not be easy. This country seems hostile in an entirely different way to the Indian subcontinent.

On the other hand, there have been light moments, moments of friendship and humour. Isn't it funny how you can connect with someone, suddenly, on some level? Just for an hour or a moment. Then it's gone. Then suddenly it is someone else. A teleportation from one bubble of reality to another: seeing the world through someone else's eyes, or a fraction of your own. You share a

moment, or a feeling, perhaps a common sentiment. Whatever. Then it could be gone, unrecoverable. For that time, you feel close to them; but it doesn't last long.

Is that enough to sustain you through life? Or should she have accepted the marriage plans that were laid out for her. What panic was it that drove her away from tradition? Would it have been so terrible?

Where is the Padang? The sweet warmth of the air, filled with fragrances of food? Where is the sound of traffic? This place is a ghost town. Or is there life somewhere yet to be discovered?

*

Poking around the game, she works, looking for her former colleagues and contacts, but they have either disappeared or they are using different identities now. Her own identity has changed, after all. People are cautious on the net these days.

If she should need them, she still has identities and credentials that she saved before leaving PlasmaScape. They might already have been revoked, but she dare not try them until absolutely necessary. If she is discovered, then she will have lost a possible advantage.

A message blooms in her garden: *We met at Bishop's meeting. Busy? Meet me *HERE*?* The message contains a link that will carry her into a different game, a different place. Message is signed Dermot.

She hesitates. Dermot was the creepy one who came in late. Isn't he just down the hall? Why doesn't he just come and talk to her? Maybe it's a test, or maybe he is shy. On the other hand, he is the one she has been asked to work with. He is the game expert. Well, why not? Best to get it over with. She is not getting anywhere with her search.

Preeta clicks on the link and is shunted into game transit mode. A small text flashes up to tell her that she will soon be entering an isolated multi-player game cell, that she should defend herself using only weapons that she finds there.

Her image materializes in a small clearing of a lilac jungle, emergence time just a couple of seconds, but no one there to see her. Her ocular interface shows a score, or some kind of health count, a pulse measurement taken from her wristband and collar, and a compass for this world. Although the avatar body is her choice and design, the clothes it is wearing are not. She is a young girl, with short blonde hair, and dressed in a one-piece jump-suit. She looks like an action heroine.

Preeta smiles without moving her facial muscles. This place is his idea of a joke maybe.

The glade where she materializes is a fantasy in purple. Giant fronds, erupting from alien looking trunks, marry together into a wall of thick vegetation.

She can see pink sky above them. A rugged looking stick is lying on the ground in front of her, but she seems to be otherwise alone. There is an eerie music playing—a horrible cliché. The whole thing is pretty amateurish—not something a designer would put together.

- Pick up the stick.

It could be a weapon. There is a message scraped into the ground before her:

THERE'S NO SHAME IN ADMITTING DEFEAT

Give up before starting? What kind of a message is he trying to send? And, why isn't he here? Is she supposed to find him, play hide and seek? Is this necessary?

There is a passage, leading through the jungle behind her, but it descends into some kind of swamp. The swamp steams with some kind of vapour. She will have to wade through water to see where it leads. The vegetation around her doesn't seem passable without implements to help, so swamp would appear to be the only option for now.

So, off we go then. What dangers or traps lurk in the swamp, we wonder?

Preeta has no idea what kind of game this is, or if it even is a real game. Perhaps it is just a sim that he has bashed together for this occasion? Impossible to know what is considered good or bad here. The rules are his to decide. Play along for now, at least until we get bored.

She tries out her weapon and tests her movements. Everything seems to work okay. This is no worse than testing out game modules and debugging. For good measure, she also checks whether she has debugging access. She doesn't. Worth a try though. Shouldn't leave any avenues unexplored.

Preeta moves towards an opening in the vegetation, and begins to wade through the river. Her avatar sinks down to its waist. She can see her score dropping slightly as the body exerts effort. The vegetation snakes up and sideways around her: thick shoots that end in saucer-like bulbs. The ends of the snake-like protrusions look like succulents, but that is odd for a jungle.

Well, whose jungle? After all, this is a fantasy. The game doesn't have to make sense. Still, if it were up to her, she would redecorate.

Giant cobwebs stretch across the water, hidden partially in the vapours. She comes to a place where she cannot pass. Using the stick, she clears away the cobwebs, half-expecting a giant spider to attack. Nothing so corny – but her strength is fading much faster than normal, with no apparent explanation.

She wades for a few minutes to the other side and emerges onto dry land; her body is covered in leeches, or some such thing. On another day, she might have considered this to be a challenge.

There is some treasure lying on the ground here, by the waterside. Pick it up? That seems far too obvious.

I could poke it with my stick, she thinks. Probably, she is supposed to.

- Poke the treasure with the stick.

Out of the jungle there comes a maniacal scream. Drums begin to beat. A figure in white robes and a tall hat rushes out of densely packed wood, confronting her with a stave. It is the Pope.

“Who do you think you are? What are you doing here, heathen?”

He lunges forward, swiping at her with the crook. She was expecting something like this, so she is ready. She parries the blow and swipes back at him. He is old and slow, but he seems to have some kind of power to block her blows. To make it worse, her own score is falling rapidly. She is being eaten alive and being attacked for her mortal soul.

“Who are you calling heathen, infidel?” she taunts back.

They exchange parries several times and the Pope shouts, “In the beginning was the word. Now words make our new beginnings.”

The pope loses his staff, as she strikes rapid double blows and kicks with her legs at the same time. If this is a test, she should show Dermot that she is not some push-over bimbo that he can mess with. “The power is with you, child. But are you ready to surrender to god?” The Pope back-flips away and gets ready to charge at her. His staff has regenerated.

Preeta jumps and finds that she can leap up to the branch of one of the trees next to her. The Pope does not seem to be able to follow her up there, but he prowls like a lion at the base, calling taunts. “Repent your sins! Confess and be saved. Give to the church and be redeemed.”

Fine. What now? Is she supposed to be going somewhere?

She calls out, “Dermot?” Is there a point to this?

There is no response.

“Dermot?”

A nagging part of her begins to wonder: was the person who drew her here truly Dermot? She did not check the ID carefully. What if *they* have found her?

Her pulse begins to quicken and she sees that this causes her score to plummet even faster. In the air before her eyes, ghostly letters slides across her visual field and a voice echoes its message.

THE FUTURE IS NEVER WHERE YOU THINK IT IS.

The tree whispers to her.

Shoots from the tree branch start to sway and move. Feelers wrap around her legs and work their way up her body, covering the leech-like attackers. She is

thrust involuntarily back into a memory of her capture in Kuala Lumpur, and, in her real body, she feels an unpleasant phantom in her lower regions. Her pulse sky-rockets.

Sharp chill. This is not amusing any more. If this is Dermot's way of saying welcome, then it leaves something to be desired. If it is an attempt to make her uncomfortable, then it seems to be working. If, on the other hand, it is the mafia who have located her and are sending her a warning, then she is in deep trouble.

"Stop it!" she calls out. "I give in!"

The game stops abruptly, as if nothing abnormal were afoot, and she is lowered to the ground, next to a male figure, presumably Dermot. The scenery whitens to show that it is not active. It simply becomes a chat space.

"I thought you might like to see what we do at my day job," he says unapologetically.

It takes her a moment to respond, but she hides her anxiety and replies simply, "Well, it's nice, but I'm not in the mood."

"Okay."

"Did you want something?"

He does not seem to be easily fooled. Something about the pauses in his replies. One can infer a lot from pauses.

His character is a much more handsome man than he is, and much more solid of character and build. "Thought it was time we met," he responds, enigmatically.

"You could just try coming to my workstation. I'm not dangerous."

"Nope. I'm not there. I'm working at my real job."

"I see. Well, next time then. Never mind."

He seems more confident here than he did at the meeting. Obviously this is his way of being a preferred self.

"Bishop told me to work with you. You have knowledge of some of the information systems that we don't know about?"

"I suppose so. He told me you are an expert game programmer."

"I suppose so."

"Then, I suppose you're right."

"I suppose so."

They laugh. "We should get to know each other."

"Okay. So here we are."

"Can we go somewhere else?"

His avatar nods. "Tie in and follow me. Hand."

She gives him her hand, and the display dissolves; it fades them into a different place, next to a fountain. It is evening and there are sim-people walking around near to them. There is something familiar about it.

"Where are we?"

“Turn around.”

She turns around. The twin towers of VKuala Lumpur rise into the night sky, glittering like Christmas trees, tied together with tinsel.

“Welcome home.”

She smiles. “The real ones are better, but this is nice.”

“Or we could go to VOslo? Has anyone given you the tour?”

She shakes her head. “Not yet.”

“They will.”

“Yes, they have said so.”

He nods.

“They were talking about taking me out to enjoy the town one night. So far all I have seen is drug addicts during the day. I heard that there is a night-life. You’ll come along, if we go out?”

“Ahh. Well.”

“You don’t like going out?”

“I prefer being in here.”

“You should come.”

“Maybe.”

She nods. “You’ll change your mind.”

Dermot does not answer. His figure carefully conceals any link between its appearance and his feelings. Preeta waits for some change, a sense that he is willing to let down his barriers, but nothing happens.

“All right,” she says. “Let’s stay here awhile.”

Dermot bows, like some kind of Eastern warrior. “Let me show you some of the things I do, and then maybe you can do the same.”

She okays. “I suppose we have to start somehow.”

Dermot smiles: a rare occurrence in the presence of a lady.

*

“Hey Preeta, what’s up?”

Ivar.

“I’m looking at the incoming reports on mafia activities.”

“How come?”

“I have a personal interest.”

“They have a site online. There are probably people in intelligence who know how to access them too.”

“I know.” She looks at him. “What?”

“Nothing.”

Manipulating the controls on the interfaces is second nature to her. She can do it, even while reading his unconvincing expression.

"It's nothing that I'm not supposed to be doing."

"Oh, of course not! That's not what I meant."

"But I still have a personal interest."

He waits until she can no longer stand the prickling on the nape of her neck.

"I want to see if I can find out anything about my friend."

"So, why didn't she just come with you?"

"She still has a job. Besides, I can't talk about my work there. It was a private project. It was for non-disclosure."

He gives her the look again.

"What?"

"You're an odd one."

"I am not!"

"You're kind of jumpy. We're just trying to be nice to you, you know. You seem all suspicious and. . ."

"Look, I was threatened and attacked, you know, before I came here."

He nods. "Right. Sorry." His body breaks out into a sweat. "So what are we looking at?"

"There is all kind of activity – a whole new wave of incidents of crime and game related complaints since the news story about the game broke."

"Yeah, Jonathan was talking about there being cases of glitches in the advertising technologies that have been showing up examples of government manipulation. There is a whole conspiracy theory about it going down."

Preeta does not reply. At times like this, she almost wishes she wore the hijab. It can be an effective shield.

"So, have you heard any news from anyone back home?"

She shakes her head imperceptibly. "I am trying to find out something through the developer forum chat lines, but I don't have access officially any more. They seem to be under a lock-down."

"Well, do they know what has happened to you?"

"That's not it. I'm not important."

"Then what?"

"That's what I'm trying to find out."

How about just leaving me alone for now? Don't you have work to do?

She cannot afford to say it, even if her mind is striking a gong in complaint; echoes of Asia resound in the emptiness of her skull. There is no sweat shop here. The workers barely work. If anything they come and bother her in the name of work. They spend too much time talking. Perhaps it is just the novelty of a new face. They are probably trying to be nice to her. But one cannot help but wonder if they ever do anything.

Had this been Kuala Lumpur, she would have welcomed the distraction. If there had even been as much as a single good looking man here. . .

"So, is the software you have been working on any good? Have you found out anything interesting?"

"I'm not sure. I'm still looking. I promised Bishop that I would get started on testing it out – the software."

"You designed it, right?"

"Not exactly. I just applied someone else's ideas to the game."

"Who?"

"What?"

"Whose ideas?"

She glances at him, while still trying to ignore him with her face buried in the screen. "I can't say."

He looks dissatisfied with the answer, but seems to accept it.

"So what are you searching for?"

"You already asked me that."

"I mean where?"

She suppresses a sigh. "Police reports, records. I was trying to get to Interpol, but I don't know how to get in yet, so I'm looking through Europol."

"Find anything useful?"

"Not really."

"Look at this though." She flicks through the list. "A report here, from yesterday about a similar story, here in Oslo. Someone being threatened for knowledge about game strategies."

"Well I've heard of people auctioning game-skills for money, but that's taking it a bit far."

"It is reported as a realistic threat."

"Coincidence?"

"Or someone looking for me?"

He shrugs. "No need to be paranoid now. You're safe enough here."

"Easy for you to say."

"Yeah."

"There's more. Maybe just a coincidence."

"More? What?"

"Look at this."

Ivar looks at the screen, then to her, then back at the screen and back at her again. His expressions says: what exactly am I looking at?

"Perhaps Jonathan should see this."

He shakes his head profusely. "That's a project in itself."

"What?"

"Let's keep it between us."

"Because he is difficult to talk to?"

"No, he has no trouble starting a conversation. He just doesn't know how to end one."

"Ah." Shyness comes in many forms. "But we should talk to someone?"

"But we don't know anything yet."

"Well, nothing exact. What about suspicion?"

"I don't think that's going to sell anyone."

She sighs. "I'm not getting anywhere. I should be, but this is the closest thing I've found to .. something."

"Too bad."

"But don't you think it's a bit strange?"

He shrugs. "Why?"

A sigh can also sound silently on the inside. "My instinct tells me that this is important."

"I wouldn't spend too much time on it, if I were you. Stuff like this comes in a lot."

She shakes her head. No time to lose heart. She wants to do something. There needs to be some action. Too much running away, not enough standing ground.

Memory kicks in. The methods. The five weaknesses. She needs to change the balance of power. She unties her hair from its pony tail and lets it fall across her shoulders. She rubs her neck, lifting her arm to puff up her breasts. This usually has an effect on men. She is not certain whether she is really pretty, but it usually seems to work.

"I would feel a lot better knowing that I had made a contribution here. I feel so useless."

Ivar notices and seems uncertain whether to be uncomfortable.

"No, you're not useless. Don't say that."

"Then why not try to do something?"

"Yeah," he says. "Yeah. Better to be safe than sorry."

She looks directly into his eyes. People don't do that often here. It is too intimate. It mesmerises. It turns the tables and assumes control.

"Let's ask Jonathan. He is police and he will understand. He can do something."

Ivar nods, but remains dumb.

She waves across the room. Jonathan strolls over, yawning. "What is it?"

Ivar re-animates. "Preeta found something interesting with the new software."

"Really?"

She shrugs. "I'm not sure. It's hard to say."

"So what is it?"

"I was digging into stuff, following some leads."

“Why?”

“Well, I have to learn this system somehow, don’t I? If I’m going to help you catch criminals.”

“Okay.”

“I found that you have a honeypot.”

He nods. “So?”

“Well. It’s hard to explain all the connections that . . .”

“That’s why we use the software right?”

She smiles. “Right.”

Jonathan urges her on.

“Well, I was correlating stuff with the new software, just trying it out, and I found the name of a girl. A student. She is working on a form of robotic programming. Well, that’s not important, well not yet, maybe. Look.”

She demonstrates the visualization on the screen in front of her, showing various interlocking threads, passing through a landscape of colour. “The colours represent the significance of correlations. Hot and cold, you know.”

Jonathan appears interested. The graphics are impressive if nothing else.

“I don’t really understand this but it looks cool.”

“Anyway. Here is the girl. It turns out that she has been spending time in your honeypot, doing some interesting things. And she is related, in the model, to someone in the city who was threatened by a mystery caller, assumed Russian mafia. They are both correlated to gaming models that include control of autonomous agents using open media signals.”

“Are you following this?”

“This girl they are trying to find is one of the people in your honeypot logs, on the tracker.”

“And something about a threat. . .”

“A College professor. He was threatened by a Russian sounding voice who asked about game related knowledge. That correlates with my attack, although it was probably just a misunderstanding.”

“Yeah?” Absorbing the significance of the information.

“It turns out that she walked into one of the police honeypots and she has been using the environments to simulate behavioural stuff. It’s actually very clever. She has probably been driving them crazy.”

Jonathan looks fatigued, uninterested. “Once more?”

“According to the system, she has been correlated with several activities, She came up on mountain rescue violations, mafia threats, an American complaint about attempting to sabotage an experiment, and a police report somewhere recently.”

“That’s quite a list.”

"It doesn't necessarily mean anything, but it gives her a high ranking. Strictly speaking, correlations are not proof of anything important."

"I suppose not. But I was looking at what she does."

"What does she do?"

"She a student. She works on making small robot agents collaborate in groups."

"So?"

"Don't you see? That is what people are trying to do in the game. By creating an environment in which people are brought together, without real guidance, but just a few hints and principles to make them act. "

"Please tell me this is going somewhere."

"What is impressive is that she also knows how to disrupt that cooperation. She has been doing in the honeypots."

"How can you know that?"

"Software."

"Yeah? It really works?"

She makes a noise of exasperation. "I don't know if it works. I'm just telling you what it says."

Ivar nods. "So you're saying that she could tell us how to break up this Christian propaganda campaign that Bishop is so worried about."

"I was thinking that maybe this could help us. We could learn something from this incident."

"Or from her."

"So, does Bishop know?"

Is he serious, or humouring her?

*

Imagine being a bird, up there in the sky. The wind is blowing hard, buffeting you. You're cold and dizzy with oxygen. Sore from the rushing of the air and wind. It is this physical sensation that is missing from the VR. You cannot simulate that with hardware, suits or visual cues. That kind of light, pervasive touch will never be reproducible as a solitary experience.

Preeta has been hiding in the VR until now. But that is no escape. Freedom is not given, it is taken. She feels dull and uninteresting in this grey winter world of Oslo. She wants to shop, or get a manicure or do something feminine—anything. If she is going to go out on the town, then she needs clothes. Being surrounded by these geeky boys, who know nothing of adventure, does nothing for her self-esteem. She needs that buffeting, that oxygen.

Lunch time is the time when the Norwegians flock to consume what they profess to be a form of food. Dark squares wrapped in noisy paper. It scarcely

seems to be plausible source of nourishment; fortunately, it is possible to opt out of these rituals. Her absence will not be conspicuous.

During such cracks in their interface, she can plan small excursions into the daylight city. Small trips build confidence. Incremental moves, exploring, learning, growing.

She wanders out of the Police building, into the shopping street. It is getting close to Christmas and they shops are filling with bright decorations and insipid carols. Her mobile is still new to her and there are grounds for caution; she is not used to the advertising that streams, knocking against her firewall. She has been trying to exorcise a stream of unwanted messages selling mobile-insurance for some days now. Ironically, when she is out on the street, what she most needs is insurance against the insurance.

She passes through the curtains of icy rain and finds her way into an arcade. Parasol to paraply: she has learned, if nothing else, to carry an umbrella here. Rumour has it that this is a place to buy perfume and clothing, straws to clutch to make her new self complete.

The shops light up an inviting radiance in the rainy darkness. Little islands of simulated humanity in a film-noir daytime gloom. As hot air blasts down onto her umbrella at the mall threshold, water flies from its membrane and her mobile writhes in a new deluge of incoming ads.

DOES YOUR PET MISS JESUS CHRIST? SAD PETS ARE
TELLING YOU WHAT THEY NEED! SAVE YOUR PET'S
SOUL!
DOWNLOAD PEARLY GATEWAY NOW TO CONTINUE.

*Ten Euros to pass on our special offer to your friends.
Accept?*

*AdaptaPet says: "I like watching PlasmaToons! Show me
PlasmaToons and I'll translate for you! We can make new
friends together!"*

She clears the messages away like unwanted cobwebs and moves into shopping tunnel, folding away the umbrella.

Three C's: clothes, cosmetics and cologne.

As the damp smell of ice and forest that blows down from Oslo's surrounding hills is guillotined by the curtain of hot air at the mall's entrance threshold, the only new smells she can sense are neither subtle nor sensual. Candy, cinnamon and hot raisins. Not the sticky sweet smells of roasting Asian meats and fruits, this is a hot synthetic sugar of a cultural desert. This is not a musk of intrigue and mystique. It is a sickly and indulgent scent.

Through the shop windows, one can see people moving around. There is the chatter in the air of people communing with distant voices. Assistants, on show in the shops, are tidying and re-stocking. Sometimes they even help the customers or assist them in their purchase transactions, but interactions between people are at a minimum. There is no bartering here, no ceremony of purchase.

She seems to have wandered in to the teenage end of the mall. It has a cartoony feel to it, except for the ever-present signs of doctrine. Church advertising preys on society's rediscovered loneliness, even for the young. People, inviting vulnerability, and offering themselves as sacrificial servants mingle. It disturbs her, but is it any wonder that the church still exists in this day and age, when society rejects even those of kind?

If you shop here, we will make sure that you get all you want from life.

Buy ChristaCola and feel great about yourself.

The badgering seems to be just another form of coercion. In Asia they look for ways to turn people away from corruption and bribery. Here in the West, opposites apply – it's about whom you can buy. Of course, the malls are pretty much the same, both here and there, but she senses that people are more robust to the blatant messages of marketing back home.

True?

Shouldn't assume it. Just a feeling.

Anyway, she should be trying to fit in. This is a step towards her dream. Go forth. Be a part of this town. That is the only way to know. That is what adventure is about.

Teenage kids are everywhere: they stand in the archway of the arcade, with a table and a steaming metal press. Younger kids, not in school: *Waffles for Christmas Aid*? No one is in school. What is going on?

"Five Euros for a waffle? Proceeds go to the Lord's Christmas charity."

Aid with church strings attached: join our club and we'll give you a meal. No thanks. No different from organized crime. Thriving on the poverty of others is the mark of a gangster, not of a charity.

Suddenly, she is pushed from behind into the stream of bodies entering the mall. The arcade is not a dark grotto, given the faltering light outdoors: it sparkles somewhat with artificial illumination. Someone talking into their glasses walks into her.

"Jesus!" somebody says, not a Christian.

She passes a media store and an unctuous voice booms out of the high speed video clip:

"DRINK DEPRAVATION AND GET 20 PERCENT DISCOUNT
ON TJUNES."

Young girls walk in twos and threes, checking out clothing and gaming consoles, or gossiping with friends, some in person, some via their mobiles. It seems normal. It seems safe enough.

Preeta is starting to feel safe. She is slowly letting down her guard. It is no longer necessary to look over her shoulder at every moment, wondering if someone is out to destroy her, or abuse her, or abduct her. In Dermot's game, he showed her creatures that could sniff out a human being in a crowd, pin-point a player and rush to the attack. Binolfactory, stereo smell, he called it. If such creatures existed, they could find her, even here, even in the camouflage of a shopping mall. But she can rest assured that such things do not exist. Can't she?

Would anyone even recognize her now? she wonders. She barely recognizes herself in this country. Winter clothes, waterproof shoes. All these things have masked her individuality and clothed her with some well-known brands. She looks like one of the rest. She needs different clothes, something more appealing. What about a new scent? A perfume to make her irresistible? Or to dampen out the smell of milk-sour sweat from the people in her group. There must be perfume shops here.

"Don't just stand there in the way! Fuck!"

Preeta's visual field senses a stirring in the surfaces, a movement in the background that covers the walls in between the luminous shop windows. It is not a moving picture, it actually looks alive, and seems to change as she approaches. Adaptive behaviour. That should not be happening here. The billboards should be static. Is it nano-advertising? That is supposed to be illegal, isn't it? Maybe it is creeping in like everything eventually does.

SHINE WITH IMAGEON.

TRANSFORM DULL SURFACES INTO LIVE PERFORMANCES!

IT'S MAKE-BELIEVE!

She is distracted by a break, a discontinuity in the arcade: a threshold of light and colour, signifying a change from teenage stores to a more grown-up battery of retailers. This is where she really wants to be. The advertising adapts as she crosses the border.

Would you like to come to a Sunday mass?

Join the Methodist church and meet new friends.

GET AWAY TO A PARADISE IN THE SUN!
COME TO SOLREISER. AN HOUR FOR JUST 50
EUROS.

Slender mannikins are everywhere. They tempt with beautiful underwear and sexy, shifting poses. She tries to imagine her body naked before a mirror, except for a white-lace thong. But it makes her look fat. Her hips are wider than any of these figures. She admires the young women around her; they are narrower, but even they would have trouble conforming to the dimensions of this display item.

Her mobile is still being bombarded with information from the shops around her. She dares not to risk opening the barriers to see if there are more sizes in stock, at least not on this occasion. Small steps, incremental growth. Underwear can wait.

The shifting current herds her into a corner and she is forced to push her way out, past tall Norwegian bodies in warm coats. She ends up in a dark tunnel of living surfaces, where there are fewer bodies in motion. It is calmer here. The walls, roof and floor are all glowing with information, animation and imagery. Most of it is for shoppers or travellers; there are news items and public notices too.

DEMONSTRATE FOR CULTURAL PRESERVATION OF
THE THIRD WORLD. JOIN OUR CAUSE BY CLICKING HERE.

A short video sequence, on the floor in front of her, shows news coverage of a crowd that has gathered in downtown Oslo, not far away from the arcade. Foreign culturalists have gathered on the street, seeking a togetherness that is absent from their daily lives. The reportage shows that the faces are all dark and non-native. She expects that native Norwegians would all be in their isolation tanks, demonstrating from the comfort of their mobiles.

She stands for a while, absorbing the information, and watching the style of the imagery. It is nothing like what she knows from Asia. Nor does it resemble what she has seen from American broadcasts. She stays there to watch for a few moments. She'll have to get back to work very soon.

Then a shadow passes over where she is standing. It is an angel fluttering in the smart screen, above her head. She has been standing still for too long and the angels are programmed to close in on people standing. Perhaps it thinks she is a vagrant and has come to save her soul. Christian mythology has become an integral part of marketing now. It is the same in Asia, of course, but the Hindu gods are cooler and look better in the fashion-wear of the region.

Still, new imagery makes interesting watching. She has never seen this kind of catholic propaganda before, not in such detail. The graphics are impressive. The angel is trying to send an audio signal to her mobile, but her barriers are preventing it. Let's not go there.

Multitudes of services are hiding in these walls, surely. She can see them with her mobile, configured in scan mode. There are so many transactions between the smart walls and the passing mobiles that it must be costing people a stash

of money to just walk through this trading tunnel. Most of them probably have no idea what they are paying for, or what they are getting: a faithful umbilical, serving them their dose.

Preeta feels exhausted already. She ducks into a clothing store to escape the current of bodies. Relative calm presides here, except for the thumping of some popular music. The piles of garments offer a sense of comfort. A young girl, standing at the rear end of the narrow shop, indicates that she has seen her come in but does not come to her assistance. That suits her fine.

The clothes are fashionable; there is nothing here for an older audience. Bright colours and adaptive shades, synthetics and designer jeans. Blue jeans are back again.

She takes a moment to breath and find her inner calm. The girl is eyeing her from the back of the shop.

She sees a pair of trousers and a top that she likes. They are black. It seems like a statement of daring, given her dark complexion, but perhaps that is what she needs: to feel as though she stands out. Do not cower all your life, she thinks. Think of life here as you would think of a game room. Be bold.

She downloads the details of the clothes to her mobile. Perhaps she will order them by post later. For now, small things.

She picks out a tightly-fitting T-shirt top, of the kind that clings to the body and makes one's breasts stand out, it looks great on the wriggling mannikins, and the size will adapt to her. It seems like a safe buy, even if she can't find anything to go with it. She ought to be buying warm clothes, but with a new jacket, this is still wearable. Who needs sensible clothes anyway?

She takes the garment to the back of the shop, feeling that she ought to buy something, as the only customer. The girl smiles broadly as she receives the garment and begins wrapping it absently. A display of bangles, on the side of the counter, attracts her attention.

"Oh, this is just like a bracelet that I had when I was a girl!"

The girl glances at her from the corner of an uncertain eye. Seeing that she is talking to her, her smile drops like a tossed pancake onto a cold floor; brow furrows with suspicion. Are you talking to me? She completes the transaction with a winced smile, and Preeta is dismissed. Apparently, she has crossed a boundary.

She leaves quickly back into the media tunnel.

The smart walls seem to be tied into the game. They probably belong to a gaming shop close to the end of this passage. Some of the billboards have errors in them: there are clear signs of image corruption in some of the billboards. The sickness has reached here too. It brings her down to Earth. Time is moving on. She should get back to the group.

She moves back into the flow of people and is almost carried through the arcade to the exit and ejected back into the street, next to what looks like cloisters of a church.

A turn of her head reveals her casual reflection in a mirrored panel, surrounding the portal of the shopping tunnel. Her new clothes still look unfamiliar to her. She looks like a man, but for her long, dark hair. Winter clothing hides her femininity even more than the customs of her past life. Somehow, she envisioned herself in a different style. There will be time for that later.

Winter cannot last here for ever.

Preeta steps out, almost into the path of an African Muslim woman with a huge backside, pushing a pram. She is surrounded by an entourage of miniature children. The image looks suddenly absurd. Compared to these Westerners, she is a bowling skittle, donned up in that Sharia garb of khaki brown. Is this the secret weapon of Mohammed? A militia of giant Muslim bowling skittles with prams to infiltrate the West.

Suddenly, Preeta does not feel so unglamorous.

*

Dermot greets her cordially, as though they have never met. Bishop has arranged a meeting of the group. A couple of days has passed since she sparred with Dermot in his game. She remembers him well enough. Has he forgotten how she looks?

“Bishop is here,” someone announces.

“Anyone know what he wants?”

“He wants to heal the world, my son.”

Nina laughs, “Do you think he qualifies as a fanatic?”

They laugh covertly at his expense, as Bishop strolls in, unaware or untouched by the jokes. His mind is apparently elsewhere. Art Haugen, the police liaison, follows him in. They both seem relaxed and cheerful.

Bishop sees Dermot and Preeta sit down together, as the small group congregates around the table. “So you two should be working together.” It is not clear whether it is an order, a statement of expectation or a question.

Dermot’s discomfort simmers beneath his nonchalance. His body language is stuttering, as if he has been hauled in against his will. “Uh — I’m actually working on something else.” He immediately seems to regret saying it.

“Something tells me that you could be working together anyway.” This time the order is clear.

Dermot nods, face practically in his sweater.

“I think we have some things in common,” Preeta poses constructively.

“Sure.”

"I have been wanting to talk with you," Preeta tells him.

"I've been attending a police seminar in Santa Monica."

"I didn't know you had been away. I'm sorry."

"I've been here. I was attending by VR, but that means sleeping at odd times."

"Oh, stupid me."

"Cheaper and quicker, if not perfect. Art was with me."

Art Haugen nods, his eyebrows raised. "Frankly, I would prefer to have made the trip. I'm strictly a beat-cop by nature."

"Our meeting has raised some issues that we need to deal with, folks. We need to speed up our virus work."

"What does that mean?"

"It means we need to coordinate. Dermot," Bishop directs. "We need to make your work a matter of priority."

"Has something changed?" Jonathan asks.

"There is an Interpol warning out. Intelligence from the U.S. tells us that the Christian lobby is about to make an offensive that is aimed at exploiting a loophole in regulations. That means we need your countermeasures prepared. How is that going?"

"This comes as a bit of a surprise," he deflects. "I thought we had more time."

"It is not a surprise, just a bit inconvenient."

"What form is this offensive going to take?"

"We don't know that yet. There are leaks about a possible new bill for congress and a ballot, combined with a big media campaign."

"And the religions of the world have been hijacked by despotic regimes and the clergy. Oops, I mean the U.S. government!"

"Yeah? What about the Muslim countries?"

"Focus please," Bishop commands, as if used to dealing with a group of unruly children. "Our friends in the States need our help, not our judgement at this stage."

"Actually, we are having enough of a situation right now tracing the roots of the gang violence that is blossoming."

"I'm aware of that."

"It never rains, but it pours."

"I don't see where any extra resources are going to come from."

Bishop stays focused on his goals, looking past the obstacles. "So, Dermot, how are you doing?"

He squirms, barely visibly.

Preeta observes that Dermot is not the same confident figure that he was in the VR. He seems ill at ease. His body language cries out that he has not done something that he was supposed to do. If the others notice this, they do not let on, except perhaps for Bishop who seems to give up.

“Why is there a honeypot?” Preeta interjects.

Bishop: “Honeypot?”

“I was looking through some of the data and I found a police honeypot, linked to Interpol.”

“Not my area,” Bishop shrugs. “You should ask the operations people on the computer crime team.”

She nods.

“So this coming action is coming from where?”

Dermot nods to her, covertly. Presumably it is his way of saying thank you.

“The Christian lobby has apparently put up a lot of money to extend their campaign. They have the resources now to dominate the media in the U.S.. Other factions in the game consortium are fighting back. The FBI is asking for us to be on our guard, especially here in Scandinavia where the evangelist churches have roots of their own. There is also talk of something they are holding as a closely guarded secret, maybe coming soon. We are being asked to stay alert to make sure they don’t pull a fast one.”

“Which means we have to pull out the stops?”

“Small country, time on our hands.”

“And all our flying pigs.”

“What?”

“They wait until we are busy with an upsurge in gang activities.”

“That’s just a little suspicious, don’t you think? Just a little coordinated?” Ivar bristles. “I’ll bet they arranged the violence as a distraction.”

“Let’s not get too paranoid. It’s the other factions who have generally been promoting interest in violence. The Christian lobby is fighting them, as far as we can tell.”

“So what kind of campaign are they going to mount?”

“We don’t know that, I’m afraid.”

“With all their resources, they are going to have an advantage. It’s a strong signal and it will be coming out in a pretty noisy background.”

“So wipe it out.”

“With what?”

“You tell us. That’s why we hire you egg-heads,” Haugen says.

“You are all smart people, but I want you to focus on the job now. Let’s drop the conspiracy theories and prejudices and stick to what we know.”

“What about an anti-signal? Like sound-neutralizing headphones? What do you think?”

“Make it work and I’ll let you know.”

“What are the alternatives?”

Preeta opens her mouth to speak, but stops short of actual words.

"Surely the easiest place to stop it is at source. Can't they do something in the U.S. to make the campaign illegal?"

"The campaign is already illegal. The point is that they are not following the rules. They are powerful enough to avoid the repercussions."

"Classic corruption scenario."

"Isn't the police powerful too?"

"Yes and no. The F.B.I. has orders from government to back off."

"So if no one else is following orders. . ."

"Ivar, if the police force is not seen to obey the chain of command, they would be shooting themselves in the foot. Anything they do has to be off the record."

"So they're shutting us all down?"

"No. They can't. They can only shut down the FBI. But that means we have to help them from the outside."

"Conspiracy nuts are going to love this."

Bishop underlines once again. "This overrides our other activities. There is some urgency to this. They have the technology to dominate billboards, smart surfaces and any environmental scenery in the game. That might not sound like much, but we already know that this is what starts the ball rolling. Once they have momentum, it becomes a locomotive."

"We'll need Preeta's help. She knows how the rendering works, and she has taught us to follow the players' lifelines."

She nods. "But you know, to be honest, I'm not convinced that they can do it."

"Let's not take that chance."

Bishop concludes. "All right, folks. Go to work. We'll talk again as soon as I know more. But please do your best on this."

The group splits and Preeta turns to Dermot. "So are we working together?"

He shrugs. "It probably makes sense."

She smiles. "And don't forget you're coming out with us tomorrow. "

He frowns. "We'll see." Then he gets up and flees.

She marshals her spinning thoughts. New urgency presides, but is there any point to it, when the whole game is self-destructing? How can they put into more messages when the system is already maxed out? Frankly, she would rather find out what is going on at home.

"Mr. Bishop, can I please talk to you?"

34

The helicopter apparently touched down, at a ground station, somewhere unfamiliar to her. The recollection is fuzzy. She was half asleep. Someone carried Vibe out of the cabin and put her into a car. There was driving, sharp swings, and she does not remember anything else, except for a feverish confusion.

In a dream someone asked her:

“Would you like a room for the night?”

Not really. But necessary. “Yes.”

They are in a mountain cabin hotel. It is a luxurious place. Frank is here with her, and Peter Green is sitting by the fireplace. She goes towards him and stands close to the sofa where he is sitting.

“We’ll be here by ourselves for an hour or two yet.”

“Sara?”

“Yes?”

“Are you okay?”

She sags a little and flashes a half-hearted smile, more a purse of the lips in one corner of her face. She is exhausted.

“Come here.”

He puts his arms around her legs and his hand slides up under her skirt, almost matter of factly, she sags and melts and bends down to kiss him. It is Frank sitting there, not Peter Green.

“Make love to me,” he says.

“I need to check my messages,” she says. “Excuse me.”

*

Daylight, silvery and uncertain. It is a welcome relief from the dark murmurings of a fever. For a moment, when she woke, she seemed certain that she was lying in her bivvy bag, up on the mountainside. The bedclothes are damp around her from the sweat of illness. But the bed is soft and forgiving.

It is quiet here. The air seems to have swallowed sound, but for a distant clanking of a chimney fin. There is a vague aroma of wood burning somewhere. She sees that Bea has been trying to call her, but she has been floating in feverish sensory deprivation.

She peels the salty, sopping duvet from her body and tries to sit.

A window, with thin curtains is letting enough light to bring her fully to consciousness. She finds herself in a medium-sized room with walls of typical Norwegian cabin panelling – sun-darkened light-wood.

Someone has undressed her and put her into some way-baggy pyjamas. A thought makes her heart skip a beat and she reaches down to check. Then the memory starts to return. Someone has changed her. . .no, she did it herself. The humiliation of having someone else clean up her monthly leaching will not compound her misery. Be grateful for small mercies.

A nagging sensation informs her that she ought to be worried about something, but the body is still too weak to support such a fervour. She suffices to lie on her back feeling tired and weak in every part of her battered body.

She must have been here several hours, since yesterday? Is it morning?

She rises as carefully as she can and goes into the bathroom, located behind a sliding door next to the bed. It feels good to be back in civilization after exposure to more rugged surroundings. The underfloor heating soothes the sores on her feet. Her calves and shin-muscles ache. She staggers like an old woman.

She makes it back to the bed, but by now the sweat has grown cold and the damp covers are uninviting. She needs clean sheets if she is going to stay there. She scans around for her clothes and sees them folded up on a chair in the corner of the room, along with her rucksack. She should probably get dressed. She pulls some easy training clothes out of her pack, some light shoes and starts the sluggish process of folding her body into maneuvers that ought to be straightforward.

She creeps, like something between a tortoise and a stick-insect, to the door of the little room and looks out into the corridor. The floor is wooden and cold. There is a damp, limey smell that tells her she is still in the mountains. The smell of a drying room filled with mountain clothing and earthen fumes. This seems to be a cabin or hotel of some kind.

Along the corridor, she can hear activity. She places one foot in front of the other until she is in some kind of reception.

Frank is not here, but his partner is sitting in the lounge area writing something.

“How are you feeling?”

“I feel awful.”

“Welcome to our impromptu base of operations.”

“Where are we?”

“Not all that far from Gjendesheim. We have are using this place as a point of contact, and as an infirmary for you. You seem to have come down with a bug.”

She laughs. Understatement of the millennium.

“Did we catch the bad guys?”

“I’m afraid you passed out on us.”

“Where are we?”

“Mountain Rescue. Looks like they finally caught up with you.”

She laughs again, yawning at the same time.

“Someone is looking for you,” he says.

“Who?”

“Someone called Lindgren.”

She breaths out deeply and then pants for a while in relief. “Did you tell him where I am?”

“Of course.”

“I should call my mum too.”

“We can take you somewhere where you can catch a bus if you want. But we’ll need to ask you some questions first.”

“I let you down. I was supposed to help find the remaining . . . the stragglers.”

“Not to worry. We’ve got help from the army now.”

“The army?”

He nods. “They have certain skills that us police-folks don’t have.”

She flops down into an opposing chair. “Any chance of a cup of tea?”

*

Sara Stensrud seems to have been under the covers for days now. The shivering and the shaking have passed into aching lethargy.

Her body has been waging war on insurgents that have invaded her, selfishly waving around their unauthorized DNA slogans in her private cells.

Don’t post bills in my bloodstream assholes.

In the final analysis, she knows that this is her own fault, the result of her own misadventure. She has not slept very well. She has not eaten very well. She has been hot and cold and hot and cold. . . It is the ideal way to break down her defences to junk DNA that is circulating on the recesses of her body.

She is feeling better. Stronger.

They have been asking her questions about the VeiVeks and about what she saw of the gangs. At one point, a police commander came and gave her a stern talking-to about irresponsible behaviour.

She tells them about her project and about the warning that Dr. Lindgren gave her. They inspect her mobile and find a surveillance virus. She fills out some forms and tries to call home.

She spends an hour playing the game, in one of the low level battle sims. She needs to limber up after her ordeal. Some good-old mindless gaming is good for her state of mind. She does not exactly cream at the idea of maiming and killing, not like her brother, but it feels good to expunge some aggression.

Physically, she needs the rest, but mentally she needs to let off some steam, to lash out at someone—a kind of inverted game rage, apparently. The muscles

down her back are aching, and she feels tired. The instinct to sleep is still strong, but her stubbornness overrides it. Probably she has now slept very well.

They fight hand to hand, or with weapons. She shoots and kicks at the phantasms of the LinearAssault Castle Keep. They fall or they melt or they explode into the oblivion of relief. It does not bother her that the game designers have made all of the enemies look like Bedouin nomads, or Chinese assassins. She would have preferred it if they had looked like the French team, but her imagination is good enough to think of them as French team with plastic surgery.

Maybe she would exclude Peter Green. Or maybe they should all look like him. A quick back-flip and a kick to the jaw. Follow up with a laser pulse. A quick death, fifty points.

What the hell am I still thinking about here?

Does he even know what is going on? He doesn't know that she is here, or who she is.

Fuck him! Why should I care.

Fuck him? What would that be like?

She feels depressed for the first time in a long time. This is not the way things were supposed to happen. She could call Bea to broadcast her humiliation, but for once she just wants a little privacy.

So she goes to Plovdiv and enters the sims without Bea. She goes to kick ass and blow up tanks. This time she wants to see how bad her morality score can be.

*

Frank comes in, late in the evening.

"What are you doing up at this hour?"

"Couldn't sleep." She has been sleeping for most of the day. He looks weary, but calm. His voice is soft and comfortable.

There is no denying that she is fascinated. Whatever. He has a way about him. But she didn't come here to meet him. What the hell is he doing confusing her like this? She has been thinking about the French team for so long that she must at least try to see them before changing her obsession. But she could have this one now.

He gestures to her mobile bits and pieces lying on the table in front of her.

"What's this?"

"Trying to work. I found out that I was able to reach some of the VeiVeks again by regular net."

He raises his eyebrows as if to politely ask if that is good.

"That means I can see what is going on again."

"Good news?"

"Not really. The guide robots have all gone into the same state," she say. "There could be a bug somewhere. If I were feeling fresher, I could make a work around, but I am not really up to it. I was just interested in why it would happen at all."

"So what are they doing?"

"Some of them are gravitating to one particular route through the mountains, and others are going off at random. They seem to have decided this of their own accord." She heaves a sigh. "To be honest I haven't got the energy to care right now."

He reaches forward and puts his palm on her forehead.

"You're still unwell. You should be resting."

She nods. "I was about to go back and sleep. What about you?" *Do you want to join me?* "Don't you get to sleep?"

"I'm finished now. Our team will stay here tonight and wait for new orders tomorrow. I think we're done here."

"I can take her down to the dungeon."

Another police uniform enters. She recognizes the face. It's the single-mother beat-bitch who accosted her at the train-station. Vibe scowls.

"So you came back." Her tone is something between sarcasm and malignant nonchalance.

Vibe doesn't answer.

"Thought for a moment there, you didn't listen to my advice."

"Have you come to get me? Am I in some kind of trouble?"

"Someone is going to want to talk to you. About your extra-curricular activities. But not tonight."

Vibe looks at Frank, questioningly.

"We are just clocking off. It's time to get some sleep."

The woman about-turns and goes to the reception desk to check in.

Vibe has spent a lot of time recording and understanding facial expressions. She has an unusually expressive face. Why else would she get her way in most cases? She is an expert manipulator. But this woman's face is dead. Lifeless. She is a robot. Maybe she can be switched off.

"Let's all get some rest. It's been a long day."

Exhaustion overcomes resentment for now.

*

"Everyone wake up!"

"What's going on?"

"Weather anomaly. Sudden winter. Snow's coming. We need to vacate this cabin and get to major roads."

“What about the operations?”

“It’s out of our hands now. Come on – hurry. We’ve only got a couple of hours before it starts. After that, we might not be able to get out at all.”

It has snowed several centimetres during the night and the air is still spitting small icy snowflakes. The road outside has been cleared, and now seems abandoned. Wispy white powder gusts across it, like a bleached western movie. Saloon doors flap and gun fighters face each other as tumbleweed rolls into giant snowballs.

She has spent the last hour beaming pictures of the scene outside the window of the reception to Bea, back in the city.

“Get out your sledge, girl!” Bea told her.

“And bruise my perfect behind? Are you losing it?”

She sees a car pull up and terminates her banter. “Talk to you later.”

Frank strolls in, letting in a blast of cold mountain air and a flurry of snow. He is wearing a uniform today. It is pretty sexy, she thinks.

“Good morning,” he greets cheerily.

“Hey,” is her more sulky response.

“How are you feeling?”

“Better.”

“Made any progress with your work?”

She shakes her head. “They’re gone. Everything has gone dead.”

“Oh?”

She lifts a hand towards the window. “The weather probably. Or maybe someone has taken them out of service.”

“Well, glad to hear that you are on the mend.”

“So are you driving me to the bus station? Should I pack?”

“I have new orders. Looks like we’re not getting rid of you so quickly.”

“What do you mean?”

“Command wants me to drive you to meet someone. He’s coming up from Oslo to see you.”

“Heah?”

“Don’t ask me. I’m just following orders.”

“But what am I supposed to know?”

“I think it has to do with the threat that you received.”

“Oh.” She had almost forgotten. “But why come here? What’s wrong with calling?”

He shrugs. “No one tells me anything,”

“I should get back to Oslo.”

“Paramedic said you should rest a while. The plan is to move you closer to the main roads. This place is going to be impassable soon. We’ll have to close up for the winter.”

“Now?”

“As soon as you can get ready.”

“But I should take a shower and make myself look presentable. . .”

“Never mind that. You look fine.”

He puts his hand on her shoulder. Her heart skips a beat. She scowls and shakes it free. What was that? Doesn’t he realize that she is attracted to him? Idiot! She turns away from him and goes to stand at the window, facing out into neutral territory.

“I look awful.”

His partner enters, letting in another blast of freezing air.

“Are we ready?”

Frank says. “Sara’s just going to collect her things.”

*

The car crackles slowly along the swinging road, ploughing through the light snowfall. The wind is gusting a little today, and the road is relatively clear, so far. They make slow but steady progress along the mountain road. The snow plough has been here to make a token effort, but soon this road will be closed for the winter. After an hour of driving, there is descent into a valley, where the road is clearer.

“So what are you doing here really? At this time of year?”

“I’m not supposed to be here at all,” she sulks.

“But you’re here.”

She nods. “There is a team of French engineers who built these robots. They are testing them, and I am supposed to get data from their tests, since I wrote a lot of the reasoning algorithms. But then they suddenly went weird on me and said they were pulling out. Then they literally just disappeared, leaving me pretty screwed—pardon my French.”

“So you came here looking for them?”

“It’s my mum’s fault. She is a woman of action. I suppose I take after her a bit. It seemed like a good idea at the time.”

“What, just to come here out of the blue?”

She shakes her head. “Huh uh. You see, Mrs. Laurent, the team leader—I think she likes me. So she said I should come out as quickly as I could.”

“And here you are.”

“I came to try to make contact with the team who has been testing out the hardware of the VeiVeks—my robots.”

“Sure, they have as many applications as you want. Tourism, exploration, search and rescue, surveillance, maintenance, gardening. . .”

“They use adaptive game theory to reason.”

“What’s that for a game of soldiers?”

“Ugh. It’s like optimization. Tells you how to make good compromises, if you have a rough idea of how your opponents think.”

“Sounds like something for a police force.”

“Maybe.”

“Stupid comment, huh?”

“No,” she shakes her head moodily. “I’m not really an expert.” She shrugs. “I’m a user, not a dealer.”

Mountain scenery is bleak but stunning. Even the best game graphics cannot match the experience of such a sight. At one point, she rolls down the window to remove the glass barrier between her and the outside world. If you want to enjoy reality, you cannot shield yourself from it.

She feels cold, dizzy and her body still aches. She needs sleep. The cold fingers of fever are tickling her again.

*

As if the result of her premonition, a man is waiting for them when they arrive. An American, waiting impatiently to go just outside the doorway of the hotel. He seems anxious to leave.

Vibe’s fury is contained only by her exhaustion.

“Hello, I am clearing up for the ESA team. I heard your were looking for them, and I have something for you.”

She measures her response with all of the control she can muster. “Have you seen them?”

“No, I was brought in to clear up the equipment. I wasn’t told when they left. Wait a minute, I have something for you.”

He seems to be waiting to leave, with boxes loaded onto a trailer. He returns with a small cubical box, sealed with tape.

“Is that the swarm?” she hisses, pointing to the boxes.

“All the ones I could recover.”

“I am supposed to give this to you in person. Can I have your ID?”

She beams him her credentials on infrared.

“Fine. This is yours.”

“Do you know where they are now?”

“No, sorry. All I know is that they are pissed at us for some reason and they have been yanked home.”

“Fine.”

“I can pass on a message if I hear anything.”

“All right. Tell them I was looking for them. And that they have no fucking right to mess up my project.”

She receives a trace smile, which immediately fades to a blank look.

“So, let’s see.” He looks down at his mobile screen and reads, “Sara Veye-beak Stennsrudd.”

She smiles with the anatomy of a duck.

“Vee-behhhh-kuhhhhh,” she assists with a huffy look. Peasant. “Just call me Vibe.”

35

“Why the hell are they using the Norwegians for this? Aren’t there any US allies we could be working with?”

The virtual presence of Republican senator MacMillan seems strangely immobile for its level of agitation; the reality of the image is not entirely convincing, sitting at this long conference table. Den is sitting near to the bottom of the table. He bides his time. There is no hurry to speak up here. There are plenty of others here talking: government aids, consortium members and external guests from a variety of religious organizations.

“Aren’t they allies?” someone asks.

“They produce oil, therefore they cannot be an ally.”

“Great Britain is an ally. Don’t they produce oil?”

“The hell with Great Britain. They do what we tell them.”

Den smiles in the privacy of his own cave. The older senator has apparently not mastered the idea of a virtual meeting. Sitting there in Washington, he really thinks he is surrounded by Americans. That, or he simply doesn’t care who he offends. The marionettes in this glorified phone-conference are well rendered human figures, but they do not necessarily look like the people who are operating their strings. Players experience a low threshold for offending pieces of artwork, with only simulated facial expressions. Still, one wonders what this man is like face to face.

“The Norwegians are the least of our troubles. They are safe, sir,” says an apparent aid.

“Apparently, Reverend Weinberg likes spending his holidays there, Senator,” one of his aids supplements. “Norway and the U.S. apparently share a common

blessing: a Christian South. A Bible belt. He tells me that it is a country where we actually have great influence, through the right channels.”

“No kidding?” The senator’s gruffness takes pause for a second of thought. “What do you make of this, Tony?”

“Well it’s just a country, but politically it is not a bad decision. Norway is always wanting to be in on the action. They never try to lead the way, or try to get the upper hand. It’s just always there, trying to compromise, trying to get involved. I like that. Stay in the shadows; make no enemies.”

“But do they have experience of the kind of technology we are looking at?”

“We hire only the best. It’s a high tech country, Sam.”

“No kidding?”

“That is my estimation.”

“Well good. I guess it’s nothing to worry about. Good. But doesn’t this add an extra level of complication to our strategy? Do you think we can cope with it? Could we make contact with the Christian base directly – to help us somehow?”

“It might be possible, but strictly speaking that’s not our problem. That is why we have secured ourselves Mr. Morris’s services. We intend to use our contacts in the evangelical churches to apply pressure where we can. I’m in touch with the embassy on that – but that is a side issue here.”

“This is the man Dean picked up?”

“Morris? Yes, sir. Here is here with us at the meeting.”

Den allows his avatar, his VR likeness, to raise a hand in silence. As an image designer, he likes these virtual meetings. The great advantage of an intermediary reality is that one can simulate the little finesses of human social contact, like the raising of a hand to speak, or seeing all of the members of the meeting in a bird’s-eye view. It is less intimidating than having a bunch of cameras pointing at all of the members’ faces, and then trying to watch nine different views at the same time and butt in at the right moment. Technology has its benefits. He has chosen his image here carefully; it does not resemble his actual physical appearance, but rather that of an older man, more portly and staid than he is. He has not met anyone here. Senator Dean has not yet shown up at the meeting.

“Hello, Mr. Morris.”

“Hello.”

“Where is Dean, anyway?”

“He’s supposed to be joining us, sir. I guess he’s been delayed.”

“Fine, all right. Why don’t we get started, before we all go nuts. What are we all doing here? What’s the agenda. Jerry?”

“Thank you, sir. Welcome everyone to this virtual meeting. I’ll be presenting to you in a moment our plan for rapid action, but for the benefit of the group, let me just run through the names. You should be seeing them on your displays now.” He pauses only slightly. “Now, as you all know, our special interest here is to

bring the morality of the church back into the fore of leadership in this country. The greatness of our spiritual institutions has been diluted over the years by the sinners in politics, who would have it that there is no place for a moral content to government. The American people disagrees with this, but so-called liberals have long held the reins of media and they have polluted the airwaves with all kinds of decrepitude.”

Assent of: “Hear, hear!”

So, Den thinks, you sly bastards. We are working for the church, after all. Somehow, he is not surprised. A cloud of doubt and suspicion condenses in his mind from the vapours of the past week. Once again, his efforts to take charge of his future lead him merely into greater servitude.

“As you know, our strategy has been to supplant the traditional media outlets with a single, more powerful array of options. We are already succeeding in attracting people away from the traditional media – although we have been unable to do this without the help of Hollywood and certain technology interests.

“We seem to have to have that situation under control, but we are still lagging behind on the transfer of focus to our position of authority. The traditional media are mostly in bed with the government, and we need to shift attention from them over to the church’s machine.”

“Jerry, I think we are all familiar. . .”

“Well, I . . . all right. Let’s move on.”

He pauses, perhaps out of disappointment, or perhaps to call on new powers.

“I am here to inform everyone about our planned up-coming R.A.O.”

“What’s that?” Den asks.

“Our Rapid Action Operation. This has come upon us more quickly than anticipated. Our intelligence services have been planning this for some time, but recent revelations . . .” He makes inverted commas with his fingers. “. . . necessitate a small change in the schedule.”

He throws up a diagram on the presentation wall of the meeting room and each attendee gets a smaller copy in front of them, closer to their visual field.

“This is a map of the game plan for drawing support to the congregations. We have an opportunity to cement the power base of the country in the evangelical churches more permanently than before, while the civil government and its arms are quite weak.”

A British voice pipes up: “Why do you say that the forces of civil government are weak?” Den identifies the man as a member of the British civil service, McEnzie—presumably with delegated powers of government. He speaks with that insufferable poshness, which belies Britain’s continued predilection for private schools that groom for government.

“Because we now have a window.”

“Explain it, Jerry.”

“Here it is. Civil government is currently stretched by the rise in lawlessness. By the lack of moral values in society – the very noose which they have made for themselves, you might say. The riots and gangland crime is keeping them busy. The forces in the U.S. are particularly over-stretched and the Japanese are apparently seeing the same kind of thing. We have a window of opportunity to move on our agenda because of recent revelations about the gaming software, as you are all aware. So far we have had to move carefully. The F.B.I. has been watching us, at the behest of our more secular colleagues. These who oppose our motion, claim to stand for the federal will. But, we are not disheartened. The revelations about the game have now unleashed a number of attacks by the mob on the computing industry. The F.B.I.’s hands are pretty much full trying to quell these attempts to move in on the game.”

“Why didn’t we think of that sooner?”

“What the hell does the mob want with the game?” someone asks.

“Yes. They’re crooks, not politicians?”

Den smiles, alone in his cave, wondering if there is a distinction. Politics is a dangerous sport, he thinks. You spend time fighting one another instead of fighting the true enemies of the world.

“Well, that’s a bit simplistic. The mob are looking for opportunities, just like everyone else.”

“Quite,” says the English voice. “These days, who is to distinguish between one group from the next? Strikes me that we are dealing with cliques and mobs wherever you look.”

“Isn’t that why we are here? To bring all these people back into the flock?”

“But the mafia? Gang violence? That’s an underground operation. Why would they want to get involved in media?”

“Simple. Identity theft. Extortion. If you control the game, you can trick people out of their private information and assume their identities. If you can do that, then you have access to all of their resources. Information is power, ladies and gentlemen.”

“Jesus Christ. It just gets worse.”

“Sir, please moderate your blasphemy.”

“Pardon me, Mr. Pournelle.”

“We have to be aware of all of these things. People are in competition over this. Our campaign is going to have to work on a number of levels.”

“Well, we have a head-start. We have been planning our campaign for some time. And it’s a campaign with many facets. Not just a simple operation.”

“Indeed. The campaign has been building up for some time, but never openly. What we are suggesting now is a more concerted effort, a strong push that will capture a large congregation in one fell swoop. It’s an opportunity that we have to grasp.”

The bong of a gong sounds in Den's head. A overlaid text shows a new arrival at the meeting. The table adjusts its length and Senator Dean materializes.

"Welcome, Senator Dean," says the aid apparent.

"Hello, everyone. Mr. Morris. Sorry I'm a little late. I had some business with my youngest. Somehow they never quite leave the fold. What did I miss?"

MacMillan says, "We just started, but the timing is good. Mr. Morris. . . ." He turns his attention down the non-existent table, sending packets of information to and fro' beneath the Atlantic ocean, in tightly confined fibres. "You have been singled out as a key person in this operation. With your access to game information streams, we can tap directly into the game channels without going through the official consortium route. We don't want to draw unnecessary attention to this project amongst competing interest groups. They would probably place barriers in our way."

Silently observing and mulling, Den does not feel like making reply, but knows that he should. Now is not the time to be herded like cattle by these Christian cowboys. "I was recently asked to help, yes," he says. "My understanding was that you wanted us to invent a specific campaign from scratch. That will take a few days to come up with, at least. More than that I have not learned yet. I have not been long back in the U.K.."

"That is one reason for holding this meeting today," Dean interposes. "Not everyone has been introduced. Everyone participating in this net meeting will be receiving bios and contact information to everyone else in the group."

Den adds. "I confess that I'm not exactly clear about what kind of campaign you want us to instigate. It sounds as though you already have a campaign. I was led to believe that I would be starting this from scratch, with creative control."

"That is not entirely true," senator MacMillan puts. "We have a partial campaign for the U.S., but we have larger ambitions here. The game has been put together to be a global event. We are not just supplanting the regular media here in the U.S., but all over the world. If we play our cards right, we can reach out and unify the world into a single moral and spiritual entity. But our campaign, thus far, is tied to the U.S., and I am told that it will not work elsewhere, for whatever reason. Perhaps Claire can tell us something about that?"

A female figure, sitting at the table, is highlighted. "Our research shows that U.S. advertising culture is different enough from the rest of the world that we must employ local expertise to reach out beyond our borders. But that applies mainly to the billboards and slogans. The core parts of the gaming can be used universally."

"Such as?"

"You tell us, Mr. Morris" MacMillan says. "Senator Dean seems to think that you are the man for the job."

“Mr. Morris and his company pretty much have their finger on the pulse and have the keys to the game. I think you can help us, can’t you Mr. Morris.”

Den notes that it is not a question he is presented with. He is pleased that he chose to switch off the emotional rendering in his apparition. “I am still checking out some legal details,” he says. “I can only discuss generalities at this time.”

“May I remind you of the deal you made with Senator Dean, Mr. Morris. Are you telling us that you are considering changing your position?”

“I think we made only a verbal agreement,” Den corrects. “I am an honourable person,” Den says. “But I am also a law abiding person. I am treating this meeting is a confidential consultancy. But I have made no promise yet. I still have to let my legal department investigate our position in helping you.” He feels Kylie McLachlan’s arms embrace him from behind, in his London cave, watching and advising. It is just as well the others cannot see that she is there, he thinks.

“Well, please find it out quickly. the clock is now ticking and we need your help. We can either reward you handsomely, or you are out of it.”

“And we shall hold you to your NDA, Mr. Morris.”

“Fine. What I can tell you is that we have the technology and the rendering techniques to make a broad campaign. When I know the details, I can put together a suggestion for both active content and passive content. I’ll need more information, obviously.” We also have certain ethics standards in our company, he thinks, but omits to mention it at this juncture. They go somewhat beyond the idea of a Non-Disclosure Agreement. “It shouldn’t be a problem.”

The figure, referred to as Claire, continues. “I can say a little more about the general campaign,” she drawls. “For the gaming part, we have two new point-scoring scripts: a conspiracy mystery and a classic adventure hunt. These are popular game items, according to our research.”

“How will these help the campaign?”

“We’ve had morality barometers for some time now, in several parts of the game, but we want to go even further. We’ve been pushing to have it built into the fundamental platform that all the gaming software uses, so even third party contributions have it. If you don’t behave as we want you to, you don’t score in the game and you lose privileges. Kids respond to that kind of thing, they are more fickle, but not adults.”

“Neat.”

“We have a separate program for coaxing kids back to patriotism.”

“Preying on kids seems a little harsh.”

“Hah. Right. Let’s make no mistake here, these kids are already under attack from a whole host of sources.”

“Under attack?”

"Sure. From both inside and outside the country, there are professional recruiters, turning kids into hackers and criminals, promising them all kinds of things for working on their behalf. Kids don't have a moral compass at an early age. They just want to have a good time. They think of crime as a game."

"The strategy is to trace their activities over time, learn who their friends are and then make them think that they are letting their closest friends and parents down by not acting in their country's best interests."

"Actually, it is easier to make virtual friends for many of these kids. They can't usually tell the difference. A lot of them don't meet, except in the game."

"So you make them a role model to your own specifications?"

"Gotta catch'em early" Claire makes a nervous soccer-mom laughs. "Anyways. Our department reckons these game modules will have pretty universal appeal, and we can put a fair bit of resources into tying in popular music and star appearances for the kids."

"Is this going to be enough?" MacMillan asks. "Sorry, I know that I am not an expert here, but shouldn't we actually go up against the war-games and . . . you know." His avatar waves its hands expansively.

"Some of the treasure hunting scenes are placed in amongst the government's war-games, i.e. belonging other modules. We are adding our own subliminal content there to paint them in a black light, but we cannot get involved directly in the warring regions "

"Why not?"

"We have to engage players in more sedate scenarios to program their attitudes."

Den proffers an explanation. "Once the pulse is racing, once it goes above about a hundred, and the body is secreting adrenalin, it is not receptive to higher cognitive impulses. People don't listen when they are agitated. They are basically on primitive autopilot. So we have to place these suggestions in the parts of the game where people are thinking."

"Exactly."

"So you draw them away from the fighting?"

"That's the idea."

"And once they are away from the fighting"

"Then we hit them with all kinds of impulses, live and static."

MacMillan shakes his head, and murmurs with a certain awe. "I don't know. This is all a new world, isn't it? Do we really have it under control?"

Claire continues: "We have noted one thousand facial expressions that stimulate the emotional responses we want. These play a key role in representing our outreach campaign. They engage people."

Den interjects again: "Facial rendering is a something that we spend a lot of time developing in different social groups. That is one of the areas where

our company has significant expertise. If the dynamical billboards and smart surfaces do not convey the right expressions to the right players, you can end up simply harming your cause.”

He feels Kylie’s fingers tug at him, telling him not to be too eager. Don’t get carried away, Den.

“We know that, Mr. Morris. And that is an area where we will be needing your help.”

“We get the players to meet and compare facial expressions. And we make them laugh, at least once every session. Laughter helps you to unwind. It counter-acts stress and builds a bond of trust. The governmental games are about winning – greed, value and aggression – scoring points at other peoples’ expense. We are saying: when you play with us, you will be happy and healthy.”

“Laughter is a resonance phenomenon. If you laugh, the whole world laughs with you.”

“So they say.”

“The billboards are central here too—in the games, but our campaign is more than that. The government’s message is multi-faceted. On the one hand, it is essentially trying to keep the populace open to the idea of military interventions around the world. Our form of governance is peaceful. We want to spread a calming influence around the game, not an agitation. On the other hand, they want to make themselves in the image of a strong authoritative leadership.”

Den purses his lips, inside the VR balaclava. These religious groups might not want to promote war, but they do want to have absolute control by essentially rendering everyone passive and be accepting of the guidance they receive from their leaders. Who was it that said democracy comes in waves? The tide seems to have been going out on this kind of social order.

The Reverend speaks. “The president has always been a strong figure. We do that well in the United States. One man speaking with a clear voice, like the pope or like my own shows. Be a lighthouse, be a beacon, and people will follow. They want to be told the Truth. The Way.”

“And we are going to tell them, Reverend.”

The man who introduced the meeting glows somewhat impatiently in his meeting apparition. “Can we get back to the logistics of this operation? I know you all have limited time, and I certainly do.”

“All right,” Dean says. “Tell us.”

A southern voice: “Ain’t it real easy? We ingress the procedure, real quick. Do our business and egress the hell out before they know what it was hit ’em!”

“We can expect resistance from the F.B.I.”

“From Interpol.”

“This is not a military operation, sir.” The British voice stirs. “If one is savvy in the approach, and chooses the moment accordingly, the more they try to

stop it, the faster it is likely to succeed. It's just like quicksand—an unfortunate childhood fantasy of mine."

"We can start pretty much straight away, here in the U.S., and that is the plan. But we have one small problem that is delaying us. . ."

"Problem? Don't we want solutions?"

"Yes, sir. If they are forthcoming."

"Then solve the problem." A laugh of arrogance. A military laugh.

"Well, the problem might actually work to our advantage too."

"Now you're talking. So what's the problem?"

The man's virtual rendition moves to the head of the table and flips a flip-chart to reveal a new colour image.

"This is a billboard that has been placed in the game. As you can see, it is not what we designed."

The image is detailed in compositional layers, with images and subliminal text shown clearly. Errors have crept into the rendition, however. Den recognizes the pattern from his investigations, and from what Cathy Kim told him.

"We are apparently experiencing some technical problems. I understand that these will be solved soon? At least if these Norwegians are as smart as they claim to be."

"Asia."

"What?"

"I think the work is done mostly in Asia."

The senator sighs. "It just gets worse. Don't we do anything ourselves anymore? How the hell did that happen?"

"Globalization has a certain momentum. We kinda started it. . ."

"Can we get back to the point, please?"

"What are you suggesting?"

"I am suggesting that this problem with the billboards can work to our advantage."

"How so?"

"We can get our people to provide a solution and sending it to these companies through the consortium infra-structure. We already have people who work in these groups. That will allow us to control these billboards even more to our advantage than ever before. As long as interpol is busy fighting off this mafia threat, they will not have the resources to notice and make a fuss about it. They probably will not even know about it."

"We could compound the distraction."

"Are you suggesting that we help the mafia?"

"Well, we don't have to explicitly help *them*, just supplement what they are going. Cause a distraction."

"It would help us to move along."

"It could work."

"I don't know as I'm all that comfortable with that idea."

"Is it ethical?"

"Ethics is a relative matter, let's not second guess. . ."

"I think it's just fine."

"Gentlemen. Lady. The Lord will be our shepherd."

The words cut a silence. They take pause, apparently looking at each other around the non-existent table. As the packets of data swim, to and fro, across the Atlantic, Den wonders if serene crustacean life is aware of what is brewing in the hairline optical fibres that crisscross their domain. Would it raise the temperature of the Atlantic seafloor just a little?

The rendered faces of their puppet-masters look oddly dead on the avatar apparitions, leaving the meeting to speculate on the meaning of its silence.

Finally, Dean speaks. "We'll get through this," he says. "And the country will be better off for it."

It is followed by grunts and murmurs and more ponderous inertia. Then, in the noise of disarray, a single clear voice speaks with leadership and breaks them out of indecision.

"So, here is the timetable for this R.A.O.."

*

Billboards, billboards everywhere.

Broken billboards. Who should care?

There it is: the whole list, and Mary keeps coming back with more of them.

The puzzle remains. He knows of no explanation, and no solution to the phenomenon and he has not received any information back from the game consortium about his own reports.

Den Morris emerges from the elevator almost into the arms of his new assistant.

"Ah Mr. Morris," he says.

"Den," says Den. "Call me Den."

"Sorry. I am ready anytime you want to start."

"Okay."

A passing Henderson interrupts. "Dennis. You stole my intern."

Den winks at him and keeps on walking.

"Mr. Morris. There has been a call for you."

Ah yes, he diverted his calls to the help desk. Nice save. Den shrugs and walks past Henderson again.

"Who was it?"

"A Mrs. Waites."

"Mrs. Waites?"

"That's what she said."

What on Earth? "What did she sound like? Old, young? British, American?"

"American woman. Middle aged, I don't know."

"Damn."

"Anything wrong?" Raj asks.

"I don't know."

He was not expecting to hear from her.

"Thanks. I'll deal with it."

"So, I'm ready, Mr. . . Den."

Den nods positively. "Well done, that man! A little later. Keep up the good work. Oh. . ." He lowers his voice slightly. "Would you mind asking Kylie McLaughlin to come in? And I don't want us to be disturbed for the next hour."

"Yes, Mr. . .I mean, Den."

*

Kylie McLachlan has removed her jacket and is perched on the edge of his desk. She is looking stunning as always, but Den can see that she has had a busy day and that her patience is on the thin side. Den places the office in private-meeting mode.

"So, I looked at the sequences they sent you. Some would find them a little strange to say the least."

"I know." He pauses, recapping in his head. "I had Raj start tracing the precedents, following the standard model, just to see what had been done before in this area. It actually seems to have begun after the Iraqi invasion in the early 2000s, after the two-towers incident in New York. An elderly American politician started a television campaign naming Europe as America's next great threat to American national security, because the French and German governments would not cooperate in legitimizing the Anglo-American invasion force."

He flips through some of the images.

"But Europe? The enemy? Who are they kidding?"

"He did seem serious."

"No doubt." Kylie McLachlan shakes her head subtly as she reads the auto-transcript.

"These broadcasts were sent on American television sometime in 2003, I think."

"Well, aside from the fact that this sounds like the rantings of a James Bond world-domination psychopath, nothing much would surprise me anymore about the American right wing. These are people with more money than sense."

"It makes me a bit uncertain. Do you think we can use any of this? What is it telling you?"

"I'm not sure what it's telling me, but it seems clear that you cannot use anything like this in our campaign?"

"It's pretty morbid."

"Didn't you say there was a British member in the group? Doesn't he have anything to say about this?"

Den shrugs. "He seemed to be along for the ride. Perhaps he isn't privy to all the info."

Kylie rolls her eyes. "Oh come on, Den! It's supposed to be a battle for hearts and minds, not for spreading hate and inciting enemies."

"Well, you know the old dictum: when you have them by the balls, hearts and minds will follow."

"Dennis Morris, wash out your mouth this instant! Don't repeat that shite in front of me after a bad day. It's just not funny." She articulates the words with a school-mistress sarcasm. The Scottish accent nails it.

"Right."

"But this is not the Christian lobby surely? It doesn't seem their style?"

"This comes more from hard liners, who want to be seen as Christian, but they are not directly connected to the church. They might be working together. After all, there is no more holy a war than a Holy War." He shrugs at her scowl. "From what we have seen, there are those who simply want to keep people fighting in the game, to keep them open to the use of violence to solve America's political problems. These people come partly from the N.R.A. and partly from the government. Then there are the Christians who basically want to wrest power from the law and place it back in the hands of the church. They have won a number of victories over constitutional law in recent years and now they seem to be mounting their offensive. Both parties offering us a lot of money to help them out with our expert services."

"You're not seriously thinking of going along with this?"

Den stops; he can imagine a video scenario where a respected senator delivers a message to the American people, and an angel comes down and touches him. He would probably burst into flames, but it is a chilling premonition.

"I still haven't said yes to them."

"I should think not."

Den looks down sullenly. "You know, I thought this could really be our big chance. Our opportunity to make money and become famous."

"Are you not already famous, Dennis Morris?" she invokes the school-mistress again. "Did you not just stand in front of a thousand people and talk about your successes?"

He shrugs and nods reluctantly. "But this is an additional contract that could mean millions for the company. And I'm sort of worried that if we don't agree, they'll find a way to cut us out of the work we are already doing."

"It's a risk. But at least you'd have the law on your side."

He nods. "That still leaves us with the question of what to do. Being idealistic doesn't solve the conundrum."

She sits down behind his desk and swivels in his chair. "I know this was important to you, Denny," she says more softly. "But why could you not play with the nice boys on the block?"

"Maybe it's not as bad as we think."

"Maybe." She nods. "We can hope so. Otherwise I'm not sure the human race is going to have all that many brownie points at the pearly gates."

Den looks up, at her. Focus, he thinks. Don't wallow. Outlook. Intellect before dejection. Discipline.

"So why do you think they are so keen on this new campaign now? What has really changed?"

Kylie stirs from her posture and inhales a deep breath. "Fear has taken over the wheel of politics," she philosophises, "especially in the U.S., but also the world over. Fear mongering has been too successful for its own good."

"Fear of what though?"

"Freedom, or loss of freedom. The Western way of life."

"Come on. . ."

"Come on! Everything we hear these days is telling us that the West is going to have to sacrifice its position of privilege, to make way for better human rights in other countries, and allow the developing world to have a larger share of the cake. They must be terrified."

"And somewhere like China actually has the power to do it. . ."

"And then they have a succession of presidents who drone on about truth and freedom around the world, at the same time as they are dictating the terms of that freedom. American citizens are probably asking themselves: are *we* really living in a free society?" She affects a silly voice: "The government says that America is the Land of the Free, which means we feel like we ought to be able to do what we like. But the government is pretty big on telling people what they should do. How do you resolve that?"

"Do you think people are malcontent?"

"The conflict is finally being noticed, and it seemed to be coming to a head. The NRA and libertarians have been lobbying for that for years, right? But it's really just propaganda and people are realising it now. America has been one of the most tightly authoritarian societies since its inception, at least in its attitudes. If it's citizens ever got real freedom, it might all just fall apart."

"What is freedom anyway?"

"Now there's the real debate."

"So the propaganda message is backfiring."

“Well, that’s my guess. This strong focus on liberty and freedom has persuaded people that they should have it themselves. Never mind the middle East, or North Korea. What about right there at home in the U.S.? It’s a provocation.”

“Well, sometimes you need someone to shake people out of their rut to get them moving? Otherwise they will quietly subsist in pleasant servitude.”

“Like the Nazis did? So, what, you need a prophet: a Hitler or a Jesus Christ?”

“Ronald Raygun or George Nulular Freedom?”

“You took the words right out of my gob, Dennis Morris!”

She looks him up and down with one of those flirtatious glances of disapproval that she masters like no other. She is sexy when she is boyish.

“So freedom propaganda has destabilized red-neck America, sparking riots, and brings gangs and organized crime out of the shadows, and it has spread out to the rest of the world. The Kylie McLachlan Theory of Everything.”

She smiles, like: *who me?* “So they have created a monster.”

“Like Frankenstein himself.”

“And now they have to take their monster out into the world—into polite company, teach it some manners, rules of social engagement. . .”

“Again, like Frankenstein. . .”

“Mixing. It’s all about mixing. Averaging the extremes. That is what is missing from their world. They are too . . . singular.”

“So why are the Christians winning?”

“Should I have to tell you all the answers?”

“I very much think you should.”

“Well, all right. Let me see. Suppose Johnny is a southern Baptist. They teach him only that that he is worthless from an early age. The only way that he can redeem his soul is to be a good Christian and then they will look after him, as only the church can, with all that singin’ and lovin’ and fallin’ and pushin’—and me-oh-my what else they get up to. Johnny doesn’t know how lucky he is! So? It’s more plausible care story than a welfare payment.”

“And we know that people are so easily bought.”

“Or else you would be out of a job.”

“So what’s with the blame it all on Europe strategy?”

“Standard part of the doctrine. Blame it on someone else. ”

“Hmmm.”

“It’s ironic isn’t it? The Americans are so open hearted and generous as individuals. Then you put them together and they form a jigsaw picture of a monster.”

“Mass hypnosis. Never confuse a country with its leaders.”

Back to the issue. “All they are asking for is for us to level the field so they can have the chance to poke their heads up.”

“Den, you don’t believe that surely?”

“So maybe we need some kind of a whitewash. There are others pumping out these messages, so we need to bury them in distraction. What about some kind of paparazzi trash campaign maybe against?”

“They want you to DDT the competition.”

“We need some inspiration.” He thinks. “I should to talk Cathy Kim.”

“Your mystery lady. What can she tell you?”

“It’s her country. She will have more experience. She might know something that we don’t.” He avoids her glance. “Besides, I said I would.”

She smirks at him, nodding. “I’ll bet.”

“We could learn something.”

“Well, if that’s your answer. . .” She springs up from the chair. “Before you do, let me show you something.”

Den stares at her for a while and stretches out a hand. She takes it and she about-turns and pulls him through a doorway at the rear of his office. It conceals a small room where there is a small VR test-cave, not much bigger than a street lavatory, and a couch for resting. She brushes past him in and moves past the couch and into the cubicle. There is no one here.

“Is this where you work?”

“Only when I want some peace and quiet.”

He follows her in, admiring her rear end and feeling a slight dizziness. She activates a simple scenery program.

She has cleverly managed to manipulate him, willingly into a position where they are close and facing one another. He touches her arm and she swoons towards him with a sly smile.

“Hello,” she says.

Den grins and pulls her towards him, holding her nose just in front of his. She smells sweetly with a tutti-frutti kind of perfume. She is breathing heavily now and staring at his face, too close to see him.

“Research?”

*

He dials up the call info from Celia Waites. Now he is even more curious as to what she wants.

“Celia. This is Den Morris. I got a message that you had called me.”

“Den. How nice of you to call. I’ve missed you.”

“Really.” He tries to conceal his annoyance. Has she called just to play games?

“Of course. Don’t tell me you haven’t missed me. . .”

“Celia. I’m pretty busy. Your message said this was important.”

"I know, I know. I am doing this for you, Den. Well, partly."

"Celia. . ."

"I want you to come to New York. There is someone you need to meet."

"I just got back from the States."

"I know that."

"If it's so important, can't I meet this person here? Why can't they come to me?"

"But then I wouldn't be able to see you. I can't come to Europe, you know we can't travel."

"Celia. . . I promise to visit you the next time I am there, you know that."

"But I'm holding the keys to your future," she taunts. "I'm not asking so much, am I?" She sighs. "Anyway, the person you need to meet cannot visit you for a while. And this is something you need to do now. I can set up a meeting. Time is of the essence. . ."

"I don't know."

"Fuck, Den. You could be a little nice. I'm trying to help you."

"Celia. I would love to spend some time with you, but I am completely tied up right now."

"Then you can rot in hell, you bastard."

"Celia. . ."

"Den, I am going to destroy you. You are an egotistical bastard and I want to see you fail for once. Every time you are on the verge of success I will be there waiting, ready to destroy any chance you have. And you will come and fuck me if you value anything in this world, because I am going to have you."

He hears a barely concealed sob before the line goes dead.

36

Blinking fog haunts the cobbled centre of Oslo. Long coated pedestrians conjure a nuance of Jack the Ripper's shadow in Olde London. These inverted thermals are unpredictable, and even unusual for this time of year. It casts a kind of surreal gloom over the capital that Dermot finds refreshing. If one is going to have a winter, then it might as well have character.

“The next stop is Stortorvet. Stortorvet.”

The tram comes to an abrupt stop to avoid mowing down a pedestrian who has wandered into the road, apparently in the middle of an animated argument with his mobile. The tram toots its high pitched horn, like an enraged steam train.

Suddenly a figure he recognizes invades his subliminal vision and he snaps his head to the left to see Christina walking into a side street. He recognizes her petite rear-end and blonde hair and his breath deepens.

He has not been able to get her out of his mind. The unattainable. The exotic. She is perfect. Strange. Weird, perhaps. She is made for him, but who is he kidding?

If only the tram could take a sharp right and follow her. Or at least let him out so that he could run after her. But the doors will not open for another two hundred metres, even when the tram begins to move again.

Like everything in this paranoid culture of over-regulation, the rules for how this vehicle can move have been laid down. It is regulated by a higher authority. There is no room for spontaneity. If he had designed this reality, he would have allowed himself to change the rules.

Why the hell does he bother with this world? He has no idea how to play this game. Hope fades inside him she disappears into the fog.

*

“We’ve seen some strange things – campaigns in the game being broken up by noise from some of the players. It’s an international phenomenon.”

“How is that possible?”

“Is it some kind of terrorism?”

“What do you mean by a message?”

“This is a long story.”

“And we are just a local police force.”

“We need to involve the international divisions.”

“As if we haven’t got enough to do. Look, I don’t know if we can handle this right now. We have actual violence on the streets. Threats and media activists come a way down the list of priorities.”

“It is these media attacks that are priming people towards violence, keeping them angry at one another, keeping them in small factions.”

“So what kind of message?”

“I don’t mean just text, but a whole strategy for getting across a message. Each strategy is formally a message in its own right. . .Theoretically, I mean. . .”

“Messages, signals. I don’t care what you call them. Why do I need to be concerned with this today?”

“Because Interpol has this on high alert.”

“Our simulations predict several phenomena. We use the honeypots. . .”

“Honeypots?”

“Traps, lures. They are places in the VR that are easy to hack into. They are placed there to lure hackers in and learn about their behaviour.”

“And this girl is a hacker?”

“Possibly, or she has a friend who is.”

“Is this what you egg heads get up to?”

“So the message breaks up if there is noise. Interference.”

Jonathan says, “It’s a bit like an old fashioned analogue picture”

“Analogue?”

Jonathan brightens; excuses to explain something marginally relevant are few and far between. “It means the opposite of digital, but of course the word is wrong. Analogue means like a parallel of something, an analogy – what has that got to do with digital? That’s an interesting story. Originally it didn’t mean the opposite of digital at all.”

“Really?”

“In fact. Originally, computers were just electronic circuits that used voltages and currents to simulate the process of calculating. Like charging a capacitor, it was like integration because the more current you stored, the more you have added up. Calculations were done by analogy.”

“Someone. . .”

“Hence analogy or analogue computer. It was only later that the name digital came along, working on a different principle. That’s how the opposite became just analogue.”

Ignore the annoyance.

“We were originally alerted by the group in Spain who develop the methods that our new search technologies are building on. I just checked with them and agree with this conclusion that the source of this interference is coming from somewhere here in Norway.”

“Small world.”

“Small world.”

“The gang that has been associated with this activity is probably a copy-cat gang based on some of the Asian organized crimes. They operate in the U.S. and mainly in the far East. Japan, Korea, Vietnam. They deal mainly in identity theft.”

“How does a mafia operate online? By blackmail?”

“They are inventive.”

“We learned in college that organized crime arises from poverty. How do you make people who can afford to be online poor? Desperate?”

“They are inventive. For a start, there is the threat of violence in the physical world? Is there anything people are more afraid of than the physical world?”

The mob wants to disrupt the police net. It worked in Iraq. The software we use is the same. it’s a standard piece of software, and the scary thing is that it depends on the same code in the game. All of these libraries have modular dependencies. That is going to be our downfall. It’s a house of cards, with these corporate gangsters at the base. They own everything. If someone gets to one of the game coders and puts in a back door. . .

Say no more.

They know everything and we are helpless. Then the federated mafia will be as powerful in the West as they are elsewhere.

Identity theft. Is it really any worse than these federated governments? the U.S. and the E.U.? They just steal their member states’ identities and replace them with something dull. It’s not just identity theft, it’s cultural annihilation.

*

How does a desperate fool get mixed up in a game of risk?

There was no mermaid lying on the rocks to tempt her off course. She was drifting on her own raft, in a nocturnal ocean of her own making, head down amongst the waves. Lie low, girl, work, don’t answer back.

It was in the early hours of an uneventful Asian morning, when someone roused her from the waking dream. Kuala Lumpur can be cool and refreshing in the early hours, as the sun is reaching above the horizon. She was trying to imagine herself lying in a beach cabin on Ko Samui, watching geckos creep up a crack in the wall. Alas, she was far from such paradise. She was where she always was: locked into an air conditioned box within a corporate skyscraper, deep in the country’s capital city.

Preeta was trying her best to carry out the analysis that would unmask a particularly pernicious bug in the game software libraries. It was in the midst of this exhaustive process that someone unwittingly showed her a truth about her journey, which she had not been aware of. Drifting on an ocean is not just simple and safe. The ocean was polluted.

She sat in front of her combo station, altar and guardian, mixing work with distraction. Just routine work. For each X in queue: consequence analysis, repair, drink water, eat, smell of chlorine, repeat cycle, unbroken tape.

A detail that she could not fathom, something undocumented in the code bothered her that morning. An impenetrable behavioural anomaly. No choice but to contact the game developers’ help-desk.

Connecting to the help-desk is an involved procedure. It does not exist for just anyone. Only authorized staff at authorized companies can do so. Preeta

was authorized. So *she* became *it* and entered a queue, seeking guidance. It is an international portal; identities are rendered genderless—a specific policy to avoid cultural bias. There are still places in the world where gender gets in the way of reason.

The help desk's VR interface is like a virtual hospital, all white and dreamy.

Please wait just one moment and someone will be here to help you.

It seemed to her like a fairy tale, like a dream. It was the start of an exchange, a relationship that would carry her across the planet. A sequence of conversations, like acts in a play. Suspense and dramatic development evolving from innocence to conscious defiance. Like a classic fable in which a magical apparition tasks its hero complete riddles and tests before it will grant its magic. A classic challenge-response dialogue.

So she began.

On the first day, she asked her question.

"Oh help-desk fairy, tell me what is the policy used by the scheduler for resolving contention from non-authorized sources?"

The help-desk could not answer immediately. The question became a task, an impossible task of sifting through impenetrable documentation and calling programming teams; it was like emptying a lake with a wooden spoon, or finding a diamond in a mountain of salt — but, eventually, they found her answer.

Her question had been an unusual one, and the analysis, which had led her to it, was interesting to the help-desk staff. They told her that they were impressed and that they would add her experience to their own. Self-taught Preeta felt pleased with herself.

She was smart.

She was valuable.

Employee of the month.

On the second day, it became apparent that the problem was not solved. She needed help once again. Billboards and scenery were intermingling and security procedures were failing.

She dispensed with the VR interface for the most part, and relied on text. She joined the queue once again. This time, however, the person at the other end was not calm and collected. He or she was having some kind of crisis.

"You are probably really smart and I'm just an idiot, wasting your time. I'm sorry. I am not even supposed to work on the help-desk. I am supposed to be finding someone to do some contract work. If I don't get that done, my boss is probably going to fire me."

At first she was confused and uncertain. But the fairy helped her as far as he or she could.

"Thank you, you have been a lot of help," she told it.

It sighed and repeated its dilemma. Preeta empathized. "If you help me, then maybe I can help you," she suggested.

"No, no. This is not your problem. It's a different part of the game, that has to do with rules and laws and weak and strong. It would need a brave warrior and access to the full game information feed."

"I have access to the full feed," she told the fairy.

"Really? No. . ."

On the third day, some time later, the ticket handler had spent hours helping her find out what she needed.

"So how is going getting your contract filled?"

There is a long pause. "I shouldn't talk about it. You might get into trouble."

"Why?"

"It's a touchy political area."

"But you had to find someone. You could lose your job?"

"All true."

Over the next few nights, they chatted in a friendly way. Sometimes they would game, or battle in the Hai Noon Karate lounge, to relieve the stress. It was like having a pen-pal. Preeta had never known anyone from the U.S., not like this. They grew to be game-buddies.

In time she offered again. "I can help you. You have helped me."

"I would like that," said the voice, no longer a help-desk fairy, but a friend.

"Well, T13, you are the lucky winner in my draw."

Her help-desk ticket number was thirteen.

"You're the winning entry. You can work on this development, but you must promise not to tell your company. You will be paid a little by untraceable money transfer."

A prickling thrill ran through her body

"Do I actually get paid?"

"Not exactly well, but if the work succeeds I can get you a promotion."

"Like a job in the U.S.?"

"(Laughs). Why would you want that?"

"Never mind."

"I don't. Perhaps your wish will come true."

"So what is the job?"

"Something to help monitor and search information flows in the game. It is very important. We'll tell you how it must work."

So, each night, her friend would reveal to her a single piece of the puzzle, laying out the jigsaw of a grand design in front of her, almost as if testing her, tasking her to make the leap, to take the job. She knew that it was wrong to talk about her work with anyone, even the help-desk staff, but he would feed her

morsels of information about the greater plan, building her trust, so she had to reciprocate.

The Russians say: trust but verify.

She did not verify.

She trusted.

As the weeks went on, she spent more time on the project. She learned more about it. It was to be a tool to help law enforcement organizations trace the roots of exploitation and smuggling through the VR. Children and women lured into prostitution. She could see the value of a tool to protect innocents. She could certainly sympathize with its motivation.

The commercial slogans that she was employed by PlasmaScape to program into the game were not messages of freedom and joy, not of release and recreation, but of control and subjugation. Preeta has had enough of that in her life.

So she became more and more aware of her own dilemma. The fairy cum friend had opened her eyes and woken her on her raft. Her ocean was a dirty place: bath water that was full of noxious poisons, thinly masked with sweet fragrances. Could she honestly earn her future freedom by working for a company whose basic agenda was so contrary to what she believed was right?

Preeta returned to her books during those weeks. She was used to studying by herself, so she studied and studied. She studied as she used to. There was unknown mathematics in the idea, not something that just anyone could implement. She had to read and learn and test out the ideas for herself.

She had an advantage over others who might have taken on the contract. She has access to the game's inner workings, in a way that few others had. She was not afraid to exploit that advantage.

After a month, she knew that the program could be coded and the problem could be solved. She delivered a simple test, a mock-up, and he told her: "Your work is impeccable."

But by now she was neglecting her real work, and it was starting to show. Cracks were forming in Mota's patience. His tone was increasingly like that of her father and it called into play all of her old guilt, all of her uncertainties.

Was she going to give up again? Did she have no real backbone? Wasn't everything that had ever happened to her really just her own fault – fictitious problems of her own making? Why had she not simply accepted the lot she had been given, married according to her family's wishes and done as she was told? Everything would then have been so calm, so peaceful? Wouldn't it?

Instead, all she ever did was to run away. That meant starting over again: it was her comeuppance, or her reward.

Stability and calm. Was that what it is like in the West? Peaceful obedience? Everyone doing what they are told in a nice orderly fashion? There, in the East, nothing stands so still. The stability she knew was of a different kind: an infinite

choppy sea, the constancy of a hurricane, of relentless, adaptive change, forever breaking up and moving things around like a school of fish, or a swarm of insects.

This too is a kind of stability; there is predictability in it, and hence certain knowledge. But it is a more honest kind of stability than the pretence of polished obedience. Isn't that true?

Now she was caught slacking off on one promise that she had made to Mota, her impromptu saviour, and she was embarking on a different promise. She was adapting to the chaos of the world. She felt that that was what an honest person should do. What is the sense of maintaining traditions and old agreement that have outlived their validity?

So before she knew it, she was involved in a subterfuge and there was no turning back. She was running away from authority once again. And once again, she had no idea what she was running into. But that is the nature of the cycle. The endless loop of tape.

Sirens wailed, on and on, during those long nights.

*

She has been playing with their tools for tracing connections. Bishop gives her credit for this work, but this is really something that she has been working on for some time, back in Malaysia.

She put the thing together, but the ideas have been trickling in for some time from her contacts in the VR. She assumed that these people were working for the game, but who knows who anyone really is these days?

It's not like you can reach out and take a DNA sample from someone in the VR. That is not even going to work in the real world much longer.

Her contact told her to keep it secret, so she did. It was mainly for fun, but she figured that one day it would give her a bargaining advantage that might save her from a future of sweat-house programming. So far, it has paid off.

"I am scared of the Russian mafia," she tells Jonathan.

"Of course you are. That's the whole idea. Everyone is scared of the mafia. that's what they do."

"There is movement from somewhere called Transnistria through the Ukraine, Romania."

"Has something happened?"

"The signals all point to the fact that an operation is mounting. It has been building up for some time. They are making contacts at all points in our graph. They have hit several of our central players. Do you think we should raise the alarm?"

"That's interesting."

"No: this is interesting. Look, there is a retarded correlation between the game consortium activity plan, the Christian response and this gang-land stuff."

“Correlation doesn’t mean much, does it?”

“It means they are moving together.”

“But there is something else this software shows up – there is another centre that is growing in size. It’s starting to compete naturally with the return to organized religion.”

“What is it?”

“I don’t know. Something educational, but there are also references to bio-chemistry. All I know is that there are ties to a large company that has holdings somewhere in Spain and the United States. The name Vascon keeps coming up. I don’t know what it means yet.”

“Vascon.”

“I don’t know what it means.”

“Hard to tell without more info.”

“I found something else too.”

“What?”

“Your group here has a collaborative research project with Vascon.”

An eyebrow is raised.

“When I was in Malaysia, I was asked to do some work like this. Exactly like it.”

“What does that mean?”

“This is closed information. You have special access to it from this location, with police IDs. That means that whoever contacted me first. . .”

“So is there anything else?”

She nods. “Look at this.”

She calls forth a broad visualization that she has been preparing during sleepless nights. She has made it as convincing as she possible can. This will be her first test. If she can convince Jonathan, she could convince Bishop?

His eyes seem to sharpen and intensify as he scans the image. This tool is new to him, but he knows his stuff.

There it is: the whole picture, not necessarily in perfect clarity — there is some interference, maybe even the colours are false, but nevertheless the devil is there in the details.

It is a war. A silent war. What else is warfare, if not politically motivated conflicts of interest? They have been waiting for the moment and now the technology is here. The tank and the flying bomb might have furnished the old regimes with the tools they needed for their campaigns; now information technology has furnished the world’s greatest persuaders with their own atomic bomb. They have in their hands something just as effective, just as elemental as the nuclear chain reaction: information.

This is a struggle for the certain existence of religion itself, she realizes. A battle not merely for survival but for domination. Coexistence is no longer

enough, perhaps.

In the present global confusion, they have seen their moment, their opportunity to bring a kind of order. It has all come full circle – from the time when men were individual savages, having to fight for their comfort, to the present time of the selfish mobile communicator, no longer able to forge proper relationships. Religion will bring you together, relieve you of your loneliness.

But perhaps it is not a circle. It must be a spiral. The world has moved on; people are more sophisticated. It is really a kind of ecological warfare. The computer, her program, sees all these connections. Politics is an ecology of ideas. It amounts to the same thing.

And her role in all of this? She, young, naive, on the inside of someone else's fight, a reactionary. They have used her to get access to the one part of the information they did not already see. For all their cooperation, the police forces of the world have few powers. They needed a mole, they got her.

Jonathan eyes her disturbingly as he studies the screen, as if weighing up the facts inside him. She can see that he understands the implications. Bishop knows some of it, maybe all of it? Does he know that she knows, what she knows? Could Bishop and his cronies know all about what she did? Were they involved in orchestrating her work? She can see that it is all a little too much for him. She has been preparing to see this for a long time.

"So what do we do?"

Will he help her? Whose side is she supposed to be on?

He stirs from his transfixation and inspires a long breath.

"Did you ever tell me about how you came into contact with our group?"

She tells him part of the story. "I thought I was being moved to a safe-haven. All this stuff about mafia. . .maybe it is all. . ."

"If someone needed access to the deepest reaches of the game, and did not have it by legal channels, how would we do it?"

She stares back, limiting the rising fury, the feeling of betrayal. Has she simply been manipulated all along?

The refuge in this remote place, the lock on her apartment door, suddenly do not seem very strong. She is no longer running from the tiger, but perhaps she is riding on its back?

She needs to see Bishop, but he has already left.

Maybe it's time to make peace with Dermot.

37

Jonas stands in the meeting room of the hotel and admires the view. He feels somehow poised at the edge of an abyss, as he stands on the firm ground at the window of steel and glass. The view of the world is upside down: blazing up in heaven, and hell has frozen over.

A fog of powdered asphalt and water vapour billows in the inverted thermals of the Oslo basin, a balance in paradox. From his vantage point, on the top floor, Oslo's patchy fog looks like a mattress, ripped open in search of hidden treasure. Some would claim that it is. Above the carnage there is a rhapsody in blue, a realm of clean spirits and sunny calm. It feels good to have risen above the plunder to this calm afterlife—but, for how long?

He feels lost, as though his purpose in life has suddenly been wrenched from him. So much working hard, he thinks, caught up in the moment, unaware of anyone else, simply focused on the task ahead of you. Then suddenly it stops, and you feel totally empty—detached from reality. Suddenly all you can see is everyone else. It's as if the rest of the world lives on, going on about its business, and you have died and become a ghost, who can merely watch.

He feels irrelevant now. What can he do?

By taking on his position at the council he thought it would make things simpler. After all, what academic wants to do his job? Only fools who live only for their own power and status are interested in such jobs. He thought that he could simplify the procedures, make better judgements. Instead, he has simply entangled himself deeper in a web of nonsense and self-inflicted torture. These days, he has the distinct impression that he was promoted mainly to get him out of the way. All Jonas ever wanted was a peaceful, productive life, to find peace with himself.

Getting mixed up in other peoples' worlds and problems was the last thing on his mind. Then Kaja trapped him. First with Martin, then with guilt. One little mistake of misplaced trust. Now every movement he makes, to wriggle out of his predicament and save himself, he seems only to sink deeper into the quicksand. What a mess.

Joe has delivered them to a hotel in the Holmenkollen, just outside the centre of town, up on the hill that looks down into the city. It will soon be filled with people for the annual Social Science Seminar. This ought to be a safe place to keep Martin for now. Certainly he seems happy running around the corridors,

playing around the tables and chairs in the lounge and staring into its huge fireplace.

Jonas is uncertain about how he should feel about what is happening, assuming that he actually comprehends it at all. Half of his mind is bristling with anger at being railroaded by the ministry; the other half is floundering to understand what kind of mess the world is in, when a would-be scientist and his student are harassed by mobsters over a petty misunderstanding. No one seems to know if they are really in danger or not.

There is no point in fighting the bureaucrats, or at least so he believes. They don't even talk the same language, as far as he knows. And he cannot fight the mob, since he doesn't even know who they are.

How did I get here?

"Jonas, good to see you here bright and early."

Jahn Braathen, a former colleague who turned from statistical physics to social sciences.

"Hello, Jahn." They shake hands. "Good to see you again."

"How are things at the University?"

He shrugs. "So so. As always, a little too much to do. How are things at the research council?"

Jonas grins. "Paradise on Earth."

They laugh and chat about work for a while. Braathen tells him that he was recently made Professor.

"That must mean a lot to you."

He shakes his head in despair. "It's not like it used to be, you know. I mainly spend my time handling applications for research time from my own colleagues now. It's a little more money, but it doesn't mean much."

Jonas already knows this. It is another reason to be mad at the ministries of government. You cannot argue with a mule.

"But greater autonomy, no?"

He nods, but Jonas can see that it is a mixed blessing. He has spoken with enough professors to know that the dreams of aspiring to professorship, to do world-breaking science are far from the current truth. The regulating bodies who try to sculpt the country's creativity have arranged for so many 'quality control' duties to perform that there is little hope of being creative anymore. And one cannot argue with them. They do not even share the same definitions. To them, a professor is an accredited unit of expertise. A professor knows everything. Once a clay mannikin is animated with the power of professorship, it becomes a symbol of ultimate authority: a passport or token of wealth in the academic system that enables groups of academics the freedom to decide for themselves what they can do. Like wielding the power of Excalibur. Without it, they are slaves to the decisions of parliamentary functionaries.

To Jonas, to an academic, a professor is just a colleague who got lucky and did some good work. It is certainly not someone with special a moral right to license activities that other academics are disallowed. But how does one explain such a distinction to a bureaucrat? It's like telling a camel that a whale is not a fish.

*

He does not have any clothes for Martin. He is going to have to order some from the hotel.

People are gathering in the lobby of the conference centre. Jonas has been walking with Martin. He sees that Kaja has tried to call him this morning, but he cannot face speaking with her now.

The sessions will be starting in a few minutes, and people are milling around in ones and twos. He could try to take Martin with him to the sessions, but that might be a little too much even for him. Besides, he is not at premium inspiration level for scientific debate this morning. Other concerns have intruded.

He stand here and wait for Joe, contemplating the city from top of the hill. Joe has promised to come back and take Martin while Jonas tries to make some sense of what is going on around him. He needs to go back to the city; he needs to make some kind of transition arrangement to protect the hundreds of groups who have been expecting funds that will now be diverted due to government intervention. They have not given him much time to act, and he is damned if he is going to let friends and colleagues be submitted in this roughshod trampling without some kind of armour.

Come on, Joe. Where are you?

People are lining up for their coffee now, eyeing one another uncertainly and exchanging platitudes. Conferences can be depressing displays of personal ineptitude, he thinks. Academics who gather and talk after each presentation, ranting on about the subject of the talk, never really changing the subject, because they don't know how to talk about anything else. Later, they drift apart, embarrassed because this is the only form of social intercourse they can muster. Later still, they sit around at the conference banquet, eating by themselves and pretending not to look uncomfortable, if they cannot find a group in which they can repeat the same all over again.

A geeky looking woman walks past expostulating on the plight of the poor. He snatches other slices of conversation as they move in and out of earshot.

"Religious rites are a form of control that I found unacceptable from an early age: The singing, the praying, the suppression of genuine emotion for brain-washed tranquillity." She shudders. "What is the real difference between religion and the military? Ask no questions, soldier! You are what I tell you to be!"

"These are the important questions. That and 'why is Oktoberfest in September?'"

"Humans are not interfering with evolution, they are not going against nature. That is a belief which comes from an essentially religious dogma: belief in a deity who sets laws. Humans *are* nature. We are a product of it, everything we do, everything we build is a product of evolution. It is the evolution of ideas which came from the physical evolution of a mind. It just means that evolution has found a way to spread into software. It is the same process and we are surviving because we have developed communication and sharing in social systems, just as cells found they could cooperate biologically. There is no difference."

"Tell that to the churches."

"There wouldn't be any point. They have already shot themselves in the foot as far as understanding goes. If you define what is right and wrong and never question your assumptions, then you are doomed to live the lie."

These meetings are the only form of social intercourse many of them have. It probably hurts. He wonders if these people have sex. One supposes that people can always manage that, of course, but with tenderness? Is it all just biting and grabbing? Hot clay dummies pumping each other? Suddenly his academic colleagues seem distant from his own reality.

Half an hour passes before Joe arrives.

"I have all the contacts, and I can let Martin join one of my groups and keep an eye on him. Are you sure you want to go through with this, Jonas?"

Jonas nods. "Yes, quite sure. I have too much to do to be stopped by threats that I don't even know anything about."

"And Martin is okay with this?"

His eyes trace Martin, close by, playing amongst the people in the room. "Are you kidding? This is the best adventure he's had in a long time. He likes you."

As if to prove the point, he comes, practically running towards them to greet Joe. Joe lifts him up and fusses over him in a cool and collected kind of way.

"I have to go and sort out this mess that is brewing—and I want to find out what Kaja is up to."

"Is that a good idea?"

"Probably not, but I'm going to do it anyway."

"You know what you should do?"

"Tell me please."

"I have a contact through Get Smart. She is kind of the global coordinator for projects like mine around the world. There is a similar initiative in Europe called Save Our Schools. SOS."

"Cute."

"The head of the operation is a rich Basque philanthropist tycoon."

"Wow. What has that got to do with me?"

“Research is an important part of education and vice versa. She is a lone voice, interested in humanity’s future. It’s a rare thing, and she is a strong woman. I think she might be able to help you.”

“I didn’t know such things still existed. But, what could she possibly do? I don’t think a philanthropist is in a position to help us. It’s gone beyond that.”

“Give it a chance. She has a lot of contacts and she is an big inspiration to me.”

“Joe, I hate to say it, but this interference in government policy probably comes directly from the Church.”

He nods. “I know. The writing is on the wall.”

“Doesn’t it ever worry you what you are mixed up in?” he says, half jokingly and half in frustrated accusation.

“I think you should talk to her. You would be surprised what she can do. I think she is used to dealing with far more difficult situations than this. In fact, maybe I should get her to contact you. If my project is one of those that is going to lose out in this change in policy, then she is going to be interested in that.”

He examines Joe’s intense eyes. He seems excited about the possibility and Jonas feels a glimmer of hope in his dark mulling, as if he has been afforded a glimpse of blue heaven above the fog of mortal plunder.

“Your work is impressive, Joe. you should be proud of what you are doing for kids.”

“Schools only teach kids to be machine parts, not adaptive people. Not many kids manage to become anything more. Right now, we’re setting them all up for future redundancy. A cheap, no-frills, disposable workforce. It’s a moral issue.”

Jonas feels his mobile vibrating. He looks at the caller ID and his heart sinks.

“This could be it. Excuse me.”

“Mr. Lindgren, I am going to send you the address of a location where you can leave a message for me. I would like your cooperation quickly and with a minimum of fuss. I think that you are going to change your mind.”

Is it a joke?

“I can’t leave a message. I need to meet you.”

“Don’t play games, Professor.”

He ought to keep the line open long enough for the police to perform their trace. After a brief pause, a signal indicates that the trace is done.

“Please leave us alone,” he says simply and kills the connection.

Martin whispers. “Daddy, are we going to get shot?”

*

Jonas has never been able to leave Oslo. Something holds him here. Perhaps it is a kind of fear, a clinging on to familiarity. Perhaps that was also his reason

for remaining with Kaja for so long too: not so much a need as a cowardice. It seemed convincing for a while, at least until the beauty of their union was cracked open by vulgar revelations.

He told her about his hope and his dreams, and the very things that made him weak. Words spilled out of him at that moment. He gave her a weapon at that moment, a weapon that she could use against him. Later, he hoped that she would not have the presence of mind to use it, but they both know that she could. It is their unspoken truce, a basic decency in all their fighting, a line they have never crossed. It has to mean that they still have feelings for one another.

Jonas looks at his growing list of messages on his mobile. Some unknown . . . a surprise – Bjørn, an old friend, brings a smile . . . and Kaja. He nods to himself and scans the list, comparing the names. It is strange how the sight of a name that once elevated him to the heights of joy now fills him with dark apprehension.

The last of the messages is from the Oslo District Police, marked urgent.

“We have intercepted the call, and have intelligence on a plausible trace. Please drive from your current location to the map location shown below in 30 minutes. Leave your mobile on open channel. You will be safe.”

He leaves Martin with Joe and takes a rental car. What is all this? As he drives down the winding road from the hotel, a call comes in.

“Dr Lindgren, this is detective Khan from the Oslo District Police. We have traced your caller to an activist group, based just outside of Oslo. We do not believe that they are related to the mafia, but they could still be a threat to your safety. We are deploying resources to clear this up quickly. Please follow the instructions I sent and this should be over soon.”

He agrees to the request, uncertain of what to think, but seeing no alternative. At least the action by the police has been swift and helpful. They could have treated him as a madman. Perhaps this is more common than he imagines.

The little electric loan-a-car hardly feels like a safe haven to Jonas, but he drives along the route as they have requested, following the smaller roads into the city, parallel to the ring-road, his mind oscillating between his current situation and the growing mess at work. He lends more than passing seriousness to the question of which of his tormenters is the most serious.

There is little traffic at this time of day here, but he is in no hurry to arrive at the Vindern location on his map. The post-autumnal trees fail to offer their normal cover, but he has descended back into the clouds and the world has become grey once again, embalmed and mortified by the inverted cloud-cover. He feels both trapped and exposed.

The lightest rain begins to fall on the windshield, making visibility more difficult through the semi-fog. He begins to have his mobile read him his messages to pass the time.

Message one: suggesting getting together for dinner one day, from his old friend. A past life comes to remind him that it is still living on in some other reality. Then three messages from Kaja, in various states of mind. She tells him first what a jerk he is, then she apologizes and says she loves him. Then she says please come home with Martin. It will take him some feat of planning to break the news of these past days to her. Then, at the end of it, he must throw himself into another boiling pot at the council.

He slows to navigate a roundabout, wishing that there were some other vehicles on this route to keep him safe. The police have equipped his phone with their own software, but his spectres could easily be tracing his movements, for all he knows. With the right software, it does not take long to find someone once they have started to transmit.

Without warning, an old red Volvo pulls out of nowhere and overtakes him at high speed. It brakes sharply in front of him, forcing him to brake in tandem. The harsh red light of its brakes are blinding. He curses the fool, grasping the steering wheel tightly, before realizing the potential significance of the lights.

Is this it? Is this them?

As his heart kicks into gear, he fumbles to place the car in reverse. Two figures get out of the of the Volvo and walk swiftly back towards him. He expects them to be masked, but if they are the masks look like human faces.

As he selects reverse and turns his head to steer behind him, the white lights of a second car pull up behind him, blocking the way. He is ambushed.

As rational thought surfaces amoment, he hits the panic button on his mobile and locks the doors of the rental. Two more men get of the car behind and walk to his side.

“Mr. Lindgren. I am detective Hansen, please step out of the car.”

He shows an image of a ID card on a small tablet. Jonas checks his own mobile to see if any ID has been received. Nothing. Could they be plain-clothes officers? If so, why so many? Why would they stop him like this?

“Send me the signed ID,” he shouts back through the closed window.

“Get out of the car, you must come with us.”

Jonas sits tight, his stomach and heart fighting inside his mid-regions.

“Who are you?”

“Please, Mr. Lindgren. Don’t make this difficult. We require your expertise. We are asking you to cooperate for the good of the country.”

“Send me your ID so I can verify it.”

The four men appear to be Scandinavian. There is no one here whom he could tie to the accent that spoke to him on the phone. Of course, such things can be faked. They look at one another and nod.

One of the them pulls out some electronic equipment and walks to the front of the car and opens the cover.

They are going to trigger the lock! Is that possible?

He looks down at his mobile. It is flashing red, indicating that the panic button has been pressed. The men must know this, whoever they are.

Come on, come on!

The police are supposed to be keeping a close eye on him, and here they have sent him along some remote back-road far away from any regular patrols, with no one else to help out. Are they insane?

Why don't they break the windows? It would be quicker, wouldn't it? Apparently not. He sees the car's electronics die instantly and the locks open for accident safety. If he had switched the controls into park-mode, he would have delayed them.

Suddenly there is heavy a thud followed by another thud and everything goes dark. He is still conscious, but the car seems to be encased in something: a dark web has struck and covered the four men outside. The web seems to be thick and sticky. He has never seen anything like it before, but he can guess what it is. They seem immobilized within it. It can glue them to the car, and has covered their arms and legs with a viscous treacle of web that has immobilized them in a just a second. It has also glued them to him, and he is trapped inside.

Throughout the thick, black lattice-work of the web, he sees the flashing lights of micro-copters descend and scan the scene, presumably relaying the image to a command vehicle. They are robotic crowd-control devices which must have been following him along his route. They have fired webs from the cover of the fog. Ingenious. So they were following him all along.

He starts to feel drowsy. They must be infused with some kind of mild tranquilizer. The men struggle for a short while and then seem to resign themselves to their fate. Is this it? is it over?

Now, spider, come and collect your prize.

He sits there for several minutes until two police units arrive, with sirens sounding their song, to clear up the mess. They spray the web with some kind of liquid and it falls away, leaving them to collect the four bodies and parcel them into the back of their van.

"Are you all right, sir?" ID says it is Khan.

He nods. "I'm fine. Who are they?"

"As far as we can tell, they belong to a vigilante activist group. Anti-something-or-other. We'll find out later. Now that we have ID, we'll be raiding their base of operations in no time. With any luck that should be the end of it."

"Not the Russian mafia?"

"They are a small group, posing as Eastern Europeans to frighten their victims."

"I see."

"Are you all right? You should take a minute to collect yourself. Was there anyone in the vehicle with you?"

"No."

He walks away for a moment and directs his operations. His presumably Pakistani colour is rendered pallid by the misty rain. He returns a moment later.

"You'll be staying in town will you, sir?"

He nods.

"We might need to ask you some questions, to make our conviction. If you do leave, make sure that you have an authentication with you so we can conduct our business by mobile."

He nods.

"Is there anyone you would like us to inform of today's operation?"

He considers registering his use of time, but in all honesty he doesn't care two bits what anyone thinks.

"I'll be fine."

"All right, Now, let's see if we can move these cars, so you can get out of here."

"Thanks."

Jonas walks a short distance down the road to breathe and feel the cold dampness on his face. He dials up Joe to tell him what has happened. Joe has waited at the hotel to have lunch. He agrees to drive down to meet him and bring Martin.

"It's time to take my child back to his mother," he tells him "I don't suppose you feel like helping me with that?"

Stupid question. He cannot drag Joe into his own person crises. He has already performed above and beyond the call of duty.

"I'll see you in a minute then."

He dreads the thought of facing Kaja now. What on Earth will she say to him, and what will he be able to say to her? This little event was over quickly. What he has to face with her is probably for life.

Last night, while Martin slept, he told Joe all about his turbulent predicament. Joe sat plainly and listened without comment. Then, at the end, he spoke simply.

"None of us can have what we want from life, Jonas. The point is: can we convince ourselves that what we can have is what we want?"

38

"Mummy?"

"Yes, honey?"

"Do you know how to make a chocolate cake?"

"Make one? Honey, you buy them from the Deli. Why honey?"

39

Den has a sudden, sleepy recollection of being on the flight from Los Angeles and seeing rows of factory hens.

"Hey, you. Good to see you again. How's things?"

The sight and sound of Cathy Kim wrench his mind back to a different bubble of reality: one from the recent past, filled with excitement and sensuality. It seems misplaced here, in these London offices.

"My head is still somewhere over the Atlantic," he bemoans. "But I've been getting down to business. What's your situation like? I heard there was some unrest."

"Could be better. There's been rioting and looting. It's been hard to get into work, but the University police have been bringing it under control again."

"You're okay?"

"I'm good."

"You look good."

"Back at ya."

"Any luck with your glitches?"

"Not really. I've taken a couple of days off, visiting my mother."

"Sounds nice."

She laughs. "Mom's okay. So what's new?"

"Well, that's why I'm calling. I've just had a meeting with the Senator and his cronies."

She whistles. "The plot thickens. What happened?"

He brings her up to date on the meeting. One group of many is planning its strategy for dominating the information environment of world gaming.

"It's practically information terrorism, though they swathe it in nicer euphemisms."

"So the Christians are ready to make their move, huh? That means they must either have some deep contacts in the development teams, or the access systems I study can be infiltrated."

"But it's not just the Christian group? There are others in there, I'm sure. I wish I knew."

"Or maybe you don't?"

"Right. I seem to be piggy in the middle."

She nods seriously. "They know they can pull your strings."

Den feels a stab in his ego that causes his pulse to rise. "Don't be so sure of that," he defends, "I am reviewing my options here to figure out how I can make this worthwhile. It might be best to keep out of this particular offer."

"Be careful, Den. I'm not sure that is really an option. You know what they say about keeping your friends close and your enemies closer. Whatever these people are up to, it is better to be involved somehow to keep your options open. This is taking place at the highest level."

"There's a limit to how mercenary I can be, Cath. It could damage our company if we don't handle this right."

"Then think of yourself as a double agent or something and make sure that you are not involved in anything directly illegal. Governments are used to pouring money into contractors who don't deliver."

"Does the law even matter anymore? With everything that's happening. . ."

"We have to believe that, don't we?"

"I think so. But our agreement? Didn't we agree to work our way into the winning team?"

"We'll do okay without getting involved in anything improper."

"But it means something. It means that the best way to help ourselves is to preserve a system in which we are free to work and develop business. If we support the Christian lobby, there is no telling how far they will regulate our industry. We don't want to assist in our own destruction."

"I agree. So that means you should not support this splinter group but still play along and appear to give them what they want."

Den frowns. If he gives them what they want, haven't they succeeded in bending him around their little finger? What's the difference?

“Don’t think you are immune being in the U.K. The ripples won’t take long to spread. This is sensitive stuff. It seems pretty comfortable from over there, but believe me, this will affect peoples’ lives.”

“Maybe we’re taking this too seriously,” Den explores. “Is it really our duty to figure this out? I mean, what influence can two people have anyway?”

“Den,” she says, with stark gravitas. “Once we are the centre of the network, our influence will be *decisive*!” Her stare says: don’t you forget that!

“If I had never gone to San Diego, I might never have worried about any of this. I thought it was a commercial venture. Now it turns out to be a political game.”

“Welcome to reality, cowboy. That doesn’t mean you don’t have to face the music. It isn’t going to go away just because you don’t agree with it.”

“Reality is a pretty over-used word.” He sighs. “But you’re right. With or without us, it is going to happen. We might as well profit from it.”

His mobile signals another incoming call. It seems like a good opportunity to end the struggling conversation. Some of the magic of the moment has gone, he thinks. He is outside of the reality bubble, where they met. Now her charms don’t have the same effect, in the clarity of London.

“Look, I have to go. Another call coming in.”

“Yeah, me too. Look, stay in touch. Let me know how you get on with the Senator. I might have something to tell you soon.”

“Yeah, you too.”

“And Den?”

“Yes?”

Sultry satisfaction. “Thanks for a great time. While you were here.”

He smiles.

“Same to you, sunshine.”

Maybe the bubble has not entirely burst.

*

Den thinks of Celia and feels a pang of guilt. She was the most important person in his life a year ago, and now they have grown distant. The tugging in his chest tells him that he is still ensnared by her somehow, but he also knows himself well enough to know that any graceful female body could distract him at any time. He simply cannot help it. However much he ought to leave it alone, he knows it is a compulsion.

Celia was tender and beautiful. She had a special kind of grace with her older years, unspoilt and sturdy of mind. She is a good woman, he thinks. So lonely. I’ll call her soon, when I’m over this tough patch.

He has spent the last few days consolidating his position with Cathy Kim in their efforts to find the core group of the game’s custodians, “networking” as she

likes to call it. They have been making themselves known, marketing themselves, as Den knows best. It is rather like the making of a celebrity, he thinks. A little gossip here, a press release there, and lots of time talking to people, working little charms. One should never underestimate the power of the ju-ju. He still needs to use the VR more though. He should put Mary on the job. Something important is obviously going down and he means to be in on it.

"It's ironic, don't you think?" he murmured to his virtual sister.

"How so?"

"You create a game to capture the allegiance of the masses and in doing to you open yourself up to opportunities for attack. Vulnerability is the price for reaching out."

She smiled at him. "The question is – is the risk an acceptable one?"

Later, the gnawing of his conscience had exposed nerves that would not calm. Giving in to guilt, he called her to apologize for himself, but she deflected his apology with one of her own.

"I'm pathetic, aren't I?" she laughed.

"Celia, you are not pathetic by any definition of the word."

"Then what am I?"

"Just a little down, that's all."

"Right. And how shall I get over that?"

"We'll think of something," he suggested cryptically.

She smiled at him, as if to say: you sly sonofabitch and proceeded to tell him about the reason she called.

"I am doing you a favour here," she said. "This is a contact that you can't afford to miss. She is probably going to take over the world someday, and change the way you think."

"Who are you talking about?"

"Connie Cortina. She's a friend of mine, from many dull parties. A formidable woman – but don't be getting any ideas about her! What you need from her and what she needs from you is too important to mess up by getting horny."

"Why should I see her?"

"Because she wants to see you."

Her voice made it clear that this was not something that he could conceivably say no to. He saw her face light up with her old dignity when he agreed to go. Celia simply wanted to be useful. She wanted to feel as though she made a difference to something. When she realized that she was going to, he saw the old Celia shine through, and resolved to contact her again soon.

Her life is not so easy, but she has so much to give.

So she made the introductions for him and dates were exchanged by her secretary, and two days later he found himself on a flight to Madrid, looking forward to better weather than that he returned to in London.

San Sebastian is not the easiest place to get to at short notice, but Celia Waites has convinced him of the importance of this trip.

From Madrid, a shuttle flight to the city, and a taxi from the airport to her home office proved more challenging than he expected. He speaks no Spanish, and making no certain progress with English, one must resort, with embarrassment, to the mobile for translation.

He wonders seriously why all this fuss is necessary. All the obstacles seem to have been placed deliberately in his way, like the hedges, moats and battlements of a royal castle. While they give him a new respect for the power of ceremony, as he approaches the inner sanctum, he cannot help but wonder about the reason.

We are a ceremonial culture in Europe, he notes. He should remember that for reference.

Catalin Constanca Alexandra Cortina seems to be a very wealthy woman. They say that she inherited her millions from her father – a little known shipping tycoon who managed to conceal himself from the public eye and tabloid press. Now she is an astute business woman and treats international projects like tapas, to be nibbled at and relished with a good wine.

She spends several months of the year in the U.S., from what he can gather, applying her skills to business projects mainly in biotechnology. Recently, she has moved into broader information sciences, like harvesting and advertising and, as she has become a behind-the-scenes figurehead for globalized development, following in her father's footsteps for anonymity. Lately, she has been dipping her tapas into the game. From what he can tell, that makes her possibly the only person in the social network who is more important than he is, at this moment.

The VR is for meeting like this, but her secretary insisted that only a personal meeting would be acceptable. So she is the kind of woman who needs to look you in the eye? Or, after the ordeal of the journey, he wonders if the aim is to simply make him jump through hoops.

Her Villa lies just outside the historical centre of the town, not by the coast, but inland beyond the hills. As they approach the house, he sees that its grounds have been converted into an array of out-houses, like a conference centre or even a school. The slightly hazy sunshine, of a lifting morning mist, shines down onto youngsters, lined up on the grassy grounds, engaged in some kind of activities that he cannot make out.

She is not a recluse, even if she is shy of attention.

The taxi drives him through main gates and winds around through the grounds, releasing him at the main entrance of the mansion. He nods to the driver and says: "Gracias," hoping that that is the right thing to say, and walks towards the

impressive entrance, noting the amount that his mobile was charged.

The house seems to live outside of time. It is clearly old, but renovated and therefore new at the same time. The estate has converted old dwellings into functional units that are part of whatever it is that goes on here. Den has not been able to find out much about the location. They appear to be both old and futuristic, even as they display their historical legacy.

His mobile alerts him to an identification request from the house. He transmits his card and seconds later a slightly plump, but attractive young woman with dark curls and a black pin-stripe suit appears at the entrance to greet him.

"Welcome, Mr. Morris," she says, "We've been expecting you. My name is Maria."

"Thank you," he says. "This is an impressive estate."

"We think so too. How was your journey?"

"Fine, thank you."

"Good!" Her voice is sing-song, like that of someone who has not learned the right inflections of a foreign language. "Are you tired? Would you like some refreshments?"

"Thank you. Something to drink would be nice."

"All right. Come inside and we shall arrange it. Ms Cortina has asked me to show you the estate before your meeting. She will see you in an hour from now. I hope that will be satisfactory."

"Spanish hospitality," he nods, looking around him. "Wow. Are you from here?"

"I am Portuguese," she says.

Utopia is not a word that Den would normally associate with this part of the world, as much on principle as for its uncomfortable summer climate, and yet he recognizes, in each facet of the estate, the ingredients of a grand vision, a vision of perfection. A breath of optimism buoys the work that goes on in these buildings, and he suspects that it is her optimism: Cortina's.

He is packed into a small electric buggy, whose skin adapts to the environment rendering it translucent, and they trundle around the grounds in unobtrusive comfort, as he is delivered into realm after realm of creative endeavour. Den was uncertain of what to expect of the journey, and certainly of the woman. Even Celia, who has nothing but good things to say about his host, told her little of substance about her. Maria seems almost careful not to mention her name. She refers only to the "work we do here", as if they are one big happy family. Or perhaps she rules them with an iron fist.

The estate envelops an underground biotech laboratory, which apparently finances much of the other work, a school for children from the ages of five until sixteen, then activity centres for older children who attend local schools nearby. Why not an older school on site? Because older children need to forge their own

ideas and discover their freedoms by breaking free of their boundaries. There is an information processing and analysis centre and there are resources for business innovation that leaves him wide eyed and stunned.

Den feels like a character in a Jules Verne novel, being shown Captain Nemo's underwater city for the first time. Perhaps the lady of the house is playing the Toccata on a huge organ, even as they speak? But the filaments of optimism that criss-cross this estate are not a fictional web, they are a voluntary and spontaneous exchange.

Everywhere they go, people look him in the eyes and talk to him. Everyone, from the youngest children to the oldest employees. It is their policy: to communicate and to accommodate. He sees no billboards, no advertising. It is peaceful, almost uncanny. They have caves for game playing and access to every convenience of the modern world, and yet they learn to abstain from these things and pursue their own ideas, from an early age. It is one of several projects of this kind. The second was built in India, the third in Senegal. They have an ocean liner that travels the world, spreading their working culture as well as their sense of adventure to an international audience.

He senses a mood of fighting back, against the establishment, and yet it would never have occurred to him that anyone could so blatantly revile the accepted mood of the generation, and thrive along side it. He understands that the philosophy here is not to turn its back on the present, but to turn the reclusive present around and stare it in the face.

She introduces Den to people working in his own field, who greet him with what seems to be genuine enthusiasm and admiration. They know of his work and of his status in the game milieu. He complements them generously on their facilities and expresses his wish to be able to stay longer and talk to them longer in this little cosmopolitan bubble.

The clanking of a clock interrupts them. The future does not halt its approach, even in such a parallel reality. The all-too-brief tour is terminated with warm smiles and fuss over his comfort. Maria leaves him inside the entrance to the mail building, and returns to her station at the reception, allowing him to splash water on his amazement and ponder his visage in a washroom mirror. He uses the dim electric light in the little room to calm himself and adjust his cologne and demeanour. It would not be astute to appear too impressed.

Den begins to plan his meeting, struggling to clear his mind of the many impressions and speculations which the tour has left frothing inside him. He begins to construct the possible scenarios in his mind. It is always preferable to take charge of a meeting straight away, but he is not even entirely sure why he is here. He should appear confident and calm, not too impressed, but open for a pleasant visit.

Finally, he emerges from the washroom and Maria walks past him on her way

to another part of the building.

"Please wait in there. Tea will be served and Ms Cortina will be with you in a moment," she says, touching his arm as she passes.

He follows her ample behind as it recedes down a hall passage, his mind flickering briefly from Celia to Cathy to Kylie, and he strolls into the room she indicated.

She arrives ten minutes late.

Dennis Morris is greeted in a large room with a high ceiling, elaborately ornamental; once again it makes a statement with every decoration. The walls are adorned with classical imagery, painted in some baroque style. Varnished wood, floral motifs and embossed arabesque haunt the details. A subtle soundscape of sea and bird-life lingers barely on the edge of perception, taking the cold edge off the austere furniture. If he were not certain of the dusty smell, he could imagine that he has stumbled into a VR game room.

She enters the room from another doorway, carrying a tray of tea.

"Hola, Señor Morris. Welcome to my home."

Her light contralto is flavoured with a noticeable accent, which he finds both warm and ceremonial, like the room. Could it be an affectation, to further sculpt her image? She approaches him fearlessly, in a light grey suit with trouser legs and a white blouse, her brown high heeled boots clapping on the wooden parquet as she walks.

"Thank you."

"Have you been to the Basque region before?" She sets down the tray.

"Never."

She is what, forty? She has a slender figure, but she is not thin, and her long auburn hair hangs loosely around her shoulders, not even pushed behind her ears, as if she is at peace with the idea of sharing her space with something that lives a life of its own. She is attractive, yes, but there is a paradoxical coldness to her warmth. It makes Den uncomfortable; he is unable to stereotype her.

"Nice room," he small-talks. "Is it Rococo?"

She studies his nonchalant expression, penetrating his affectation. "I didn't know that you were interested in periods."

"I try," he lies.

"Interesting. But no, we are not quite so burlesque, nor so French or Italian. It is simply eclectic and a little epicurean."

Out of his depth, he merely smiles and moves to shake her hand. She extends hers as if it is to be kissed, making him falter. Damn.

"Thank you so much for coming. I very much wanted to see you," she says. It is a statement for the record, said neither arrogantly nor coldly. Her tone is friendly and welcoming, but it contains a subtle command. She is a leader.

"I know you, I have seen you before," he says, studying her.

"Yes, in San Diego."

"Yes, that's it!"

"That is where I learned about you and your work."

So, she knows of his work. Clearly she must appreciate his importance then; but Den still does not know what she wants. All he knows is that she is a powerful ally and that her name seemed to put the fear of God into the senator and his colleagues when he dropped her name.

"You were spying on me?"

"Just watching the show," she smiles. "Did you enjoy it?"

"The meeting? Eh, yes. I would say I did."

"And you made new contacts that will make you and your business very successful. Quite the man of the hour."

He nods in supposing agreement.

"The woman you were . . . associated with, you understand of course that she works for the United States government?"

"How did you . . . Kim? What makes you say that?"

She smiles again, a comfortable smile of a woman in control of her faculties and of his. "I know my competitors."

She smiles at him for a moment, probing with here wide eyes, as if regarding his demeanour.

He tries to change the subject. "Your grounds here are most impressive. I had no idea that you were so . . . active in so many areas."

"Thank you," she says simply. "It is a dream of mine, all this. It means a lot to me."

He nods appreciatively.

"Would you like tea?"

"Thank you."

She waves him to a small group of chairs by a window and they sit. He will not touch the tea, no more than a sip, but it is all part of the ritual. All his powers of concentration and projection are required here, can't waste his image on spilling tea or spitting crumbs. She pours from the service and indicates the plate of English biscuits.

He takes the cup and holds it in his hands, placing a biscuit on the saucer.

"So you are interested in education?" he gropes, trying to get down to business. "I was not expecting to a school on the grounds."

"Yes. Our days are numbered as personalities, don't you think? We need skills. These days it is necessary for companies to invest in this area."

Unsure of what she means, he tries: "You seem to have plenty to go around."

She shakes her hair back and tilts her head up a little, smiling to accept the compliment. "The world needs skills to survive, not just consumers. You cannot maintain a society without specialists who can maintain its basic fabric."

"Of course not."

"Alas governments do not support education the way they should anymore, so we have to supplement their offer."

"You are training them to work for you?"

"Not necessarily: just training them to learn how to learn."

"I see," he improvises, not certain of whether he believes himself.

"My idea, if you will, is that we have become too spoiled in our luxury. We have become used to taking and using things that others create without really examining them. We have become too passive, too accepting."

"That's interesting."

"I think so. It means that I am interested in educating people in a way that makes them creative, not passive. Society needs such people. They are a dying race."

He tries to follow up, as they settle down, examining each other at close quarters, sizing each other up.. "And then the question, I suppose, is who are these others whom we allow to do our thinking for us?"

"Yes, indeed." she seems pleased and sips at her tea. "Exactly. Who are they, and will be continue to look after us?"

"It sounds like politics."

"Perhaps."

"So you are interested in politics?"

"Nmmm. . ." She shakes her head, withdrawing her mouth from the tea cup. "I have always thought that politics is too full of itself. Wouldn't you agree? You cannot politicize forth a world. You need people who can turn the vision into a reality: engineers, technicians, craftsmen and women."

"That's true."

"The power of the future lies in knowledge and craftsmanship. The crafts change from time to time, but the need does not."

"I think you are right."

She shrugs as if to say: of course I am.

"You must have studied. What did you study?" Den asks.

"I have a doctorate in bio-informatics. But I have studied many things since then. And you, Señor Morris, you studied at Imperial College in London, I understand? What was it? Econometrics and Media Analysis?"

"You've done your homework."

"It has prepared you for your job now, I suppose, but don't you miss the challenges of purely intellectual achievement? Assisting others in what they do has its charms I suppose, but do you ever miss it?"

He frowns invisibly. She has made him feel defensive, like a silly school boy. What he needs to do is project confidence, not weakness.

"Well, I miss some things about it, but I never really liked the student life. I wanted to take more responsibility. It was more or less by chance that I got into marketing. But I enjoy it. You might be surprised just how much analysis goes into our methods these days."

Touché!

"I am quite familiar with the analysis. And this is why the government are willing to pay so well for the services. You offer a unique kind of skill."

"Yes we do," feeling more pleased.

"And now you are involved in this infamous game technology. You must be pleased, for your company, I mean."

"It is good news for us, yes. The offers keep rolling in."

"Indeed. But what about your Miss Kim? has she offered to pay for your services?"

"Why would she do that?"

"Because she works for the government I believe. Though to be honest, I am not completely sure what she does. But I believe that she has been tasked to find out what is going on in the extremist game lobbies."

"I believe she does some contract work for the government and law enforcement. She does research into security in the game infrastructure."

"Perhaps. But she is harmless. There were others at that meeting who were far more dangerous. Perhaps you know who I mean?"

Den raises an eyebrow. "I can guess."

"I have no doubt that they have been in contact with you, and that they want to use your privileged access in the game for promoting various, let's say, opinions. I wonder what you think about all that."

"That sounds like politics."

"Yes it does. And that is why we are here."

He assimilates the information and nods. "You seem to know a lot about me."

"It is my job to follow what is going on." She gestures around her. "I have many projects and I am involved with many companies. We are information experts. My role in all of this has changed over the years, as I have come to understand more about the workings of the world. I spend a lot of my time now in political analysis."

"I thought you didn't like politics."

"That is why I study it. You keep your enemies close, no?" She smiles at him, with a touch of amusement. "I study the trends and try to understand what is happening and who is responsible. Then I try to fit my own vision into that picture, so that I can succeed."

"Well, I'm assuming it works then."

"Of course it does. We are good at what we do. Perhaps the best in the world at certain aspects of data mining. But you have not answered my question," she

says. "What you think of these groups who would like to make use of your privileged access to the game."

Den regards her with purposeful equanimity, hiding his uncertainty as well as he can.

How the hell should I know what to think?

"I am not sure what to think yet," he tries. "It has all come quite suddenly, and there has been a lot of rumour and innuendo after the article let the cat out about the U.S. government's involvement. So, I am considering things, but not jumping to any conclusions yet."

She regards him with her probing eyes, as if trying to look directly into his head. He feels the beams ransacking his body language. "Good, then you have an open mind. I like that. An open mind is a thinking mind."

"I consider everything very carefully in my work," he says, projecting confidence now. "Our job is to understand people, their intentions and their audience. Perhaps our jobs are not so different in some ways?"

She smiles.

"But I am guessing that you have a motive in asking the question? Do you have an angle of your own on this? What is it that you want from me, Ms. Cortina?"

She regards him for several seconds, nodding, as if thinking or considering what to say. Then she takes a breath and looks out of the window as she launches into soliloquy.

"The institutions of government have become more polarized in recent years, don't you think? That is true everywhere, but it is most true in the U.S. There are pro- and anti-religious groups, and pro- and anti-war groups."

He nods.

"The secularizers are trying to protect themselves against the church, who are making inroads into politics again. Both of them want to control the country, but neither of them has done anything other than split the country into fragments. The more they close their doors to each other, the more they loathe each other, the more polarized it all becomes. It's a resonance in a wine glass, and the glass just broke."

"So the fat lady is singing?"

She smiles. "Let us seriously hope not. In Europe, the state Lutheran churches, the Anglican church, the Norwegian State Church, and so on, these all were formed in reaction to the political power of Rome. When people talk about religion, they imagine it has to do with spiritual matters, but it was really just our beta version of politics. Since then, there have been treaties: the separation of church and state, et cetera, et cetera. Well politics is now brewing up a storm."

"Religious forces are more prominent in politics than before."

“They are more prominent, and their beliefs are based on superficialities and reactionary ignorance to the information age. The idea of free access to information is a double edged sword. Organized religion has always been about believing without proof. The information age offers proof without belief. It is an unpleasant reality for the churches and mosques around the world.”

“Isn’t Spain a Catholic country? Aren’t you supposed to be on the side of the church?” he jokes, trying to inject some humour into her passion, but his charm is not a useful weapon here. She is passionate and does not respond to deflection.

It would be fun to try to get to the bottom of her passion, he thinks.

His eyes scan her figure, admiring her, in the instant of a pause for breath. She seems to notice his attention and her demeanour changes instantly. She pauses for breath as annoyance is reigned in and she softens.

“They have targeted you, Den. Both sides. That girl is there to seduce you for the side of the government, and I don’t doubt for a moment that you were contacted in San Diego by the pro-religious group.”

“What makes you say that? How can you know all this?”

“Isn’t it obvious to you?”

“I can understand your worry, but do you actually think that I am so interesting as to warrant that much attention.”

“Please, Mr. Morris”, she switches to his English salutation. “I am not a fool. This is something that I work on. Vascon is expert in this field. I employ and work with the best minds. Our company works with police forces around the world to perform analyses. All of this fragmentation, all of this rioting and terrorism that is growing in our midst, it is not just a coincidence. It is a symptom of a fragmentation of society at the deepest level. There are many groups trying to win dominance, but the most important ones are the ones who control the resources of the most important country.”

“America.”

“America. But who controls the world, do you think?” She does not wait for an answer. “There is no world government, Mr Morris. Throughout history, who has controlled it? National governments? Is it the G7, G8, G12? Or Fortune 100, 500 and so on? Certainly not the U.N.. There is a finite number of political units and governing entities. Not just one. The number is growing all the time. Harmony is disappearing. But for the moment, there is still a concentration of these people around government structures, because the law makers and law enforcement bodies are focused there.”

“Governments are losing control.” He knows it is true. “And they are speculating in the ways of old fashioned propaganda once again.”

“There is nothing old fashioned about it. It has always been going on. But in the information age, you have to work harder to keep people’s allegiance. They are being tempted by alternatives all the time. With countries like Russia

and Japan rewriting the history of their warring pasts, removing atrocities and generating a heroic mythology, people will soon be back to their former state of ignorance. With countries like the United States rewriting textbooks in a literal biblical interpretation, ignoring science, you are looking at the replacement of thought with a simple slogan. This is a good strategy for turning back the hands of time, back to a dark age where the government controls the information.”

“But we are a long way from anarchy.”

“Well, some people might like to sweep away the courts or the police to make it easier for them to rise to dominance, but for the time being they cannot. As long as there are people who believe in those institutions, they have a head start.”

“That sounds dramatic.”

“Of course it is temporary.”

“So there is unrest. We have all seen the riots and the rise in gang activities.”

“No, it is deeper than that. There is the usual constant shuffling, but we are in a break-up phase. Split off a piece, reintegrate, absorb back into a fold. Dissonance followed by reharmonization. The cycle is constantly going around, and we are in break-up. It is really an information conflict – a war between different parts of the information.”

“Why do you say it is a war?”

She smiles now, apparently pleased at having interested him in an intellectual discussion. Posturing has progressed to debate. “Dynamics of the information. This is what we live and breathe here at Vascon. Sorry. Let me think.”

What does a woman do when she wants to stroke her beard in thought? Den thinks.

“All right,” she says. “What about this? Consider how we humans organize ourselves. According to psycho-anthropology there is a limit to the number of others we can cope with at any time, so we fragment into identities and type labels. So, suppose you have a boundaries that are drawn by surname. You base your world map on everyone whose surnames match. As time goes on, someone disagrees with this partitioning of the world, and the edges begin to leak. People change allegiances and form new groups, either consciously or unconsciously. They reclassify themselves, drawing new boundaries. Before you know what has happened, they have organized themselves by sex, or by age. Then it all happens over again and it is skin colour or religion this time. This is what we have learned from Biotech. Genes are doing this all the time, as the environment forces a reevaluation of their usefulness.”

“I see what you mean. It’s just like consumer groups and targets in marketing.”

“Exactly. There is a whole environment of little signals that are making us change our minds. And we politicize it, because we are territorial. Fixed border

geography is really not so different. If you just figure out the relevant scales for the dynamics.”

“Fish scales? Music scales? Dynamics? This is not really my field. I’ll have to trust you on that.”

She smiles, appreciating the concession. but she fails to laugh. “Action scales.” Her body language tells him that she is apologizing for using technicalities to win points. She was not showing off. She adds: “You see, there is a lot of interest in the game, because people believe that it can affect the attitudes of young people. Change their allegiances.”

He decides to reciprocate her display of trust. “Yes. And I can tell you that I have definitely been approached by people wanting to send their messages and program kids properly. Both in the official government and in religious groups within the government”

“Thank you for saying that. And yet, you know, I am not so sure that they are really going to achieve their goals using the game.”

“Why not?”

“Well the usual idea is games are a bad influence on people: sex and violence, you know—that the power of suggestion is quite strong in the imagery and the types of actions. Violent actions are supposed to leave a lasting influence. The same thing with soap operas and lifestyle programming. But games are actually different.”

“How so?”

“They are interactive. The players make decisions and become more concerned with the problem aspect than with the scenery. In that sense the game develops an important intellectual skill. The action is even more cerebral than the conservative commentators would give it credit for.”

“So what is your interest.”

“The main problem that is frightening is the problem of dumbing down. Education is my passion. A dying passion, but it is our only way out of the break-up phase.”

“And yet we are in an information age, where there has never been more available knowledge out there.”

“But there is also just as much junk out there. More distraction. It is only the simple slogans that reach out to people now. Do you know why Spanish people for a long time spoke few foreign languages? Because Franco wanted to prevent people from leaving his dictatorship, or getting information from outside. It was forbidden to learn a language that was beyond his control.”

“I know academics complain about ignorance of mathematics and English. It hasn’t occurred to me that it goes any deeper than that.”

“Mathematics, reading, literature, science, logic. Doctrine and platitudes are pushing out real thinking and they have been doing so for years, ever since some

smart do-gooder said that it was wrong to foster elitism. Every sorry child can feel good about themselves, no matter what they think or fail to think.”

“We have become a lead-by-the-nose culture. It’s true.”

“But if everyone is just following a few leaders, then you just have mass ignorance. Society cannot move forward. It will move backwards. Thinkers are radicals, heretics, by their nature. No one thanks an innovator for saying there is room for change.”

“So,” he says, “summarizing here. If I understand you, you are saying that we have to keep a broad base of opinions and skills. People have to realize that the dumbing down of our societies is not merely a problem of culture of entertainment industries. This is not about reality television or voyeurism. The culture of ignorance has infiltrated our most hallowed institutions.”

“Thank you,” she says. “That is exactly right.”

“So let me tell you about a project that I have. I have asked you here to help build a jigsaw puzzle,” she says. “I already own several of the companies involved in the outsourcing. I want to assemble the tools to put real thinking back on the map.”

“You’re on a fishing trip.”

She smiles. “In a sense. Spanish traders have been coming to Northern Europe for years fishing. They say that the boats that crashed on the western coast of Norway and on the East of the United Kingdom are responsible for the dark hair and skin in that part of the population.”

“And you think you can take on the forces of ignorance that are spreading out from the religious groups: the evangelical churches and the madrassas.” He feigns a pious voice: “And an angel of knowledge appeared to me. She said that help was coming. Follow the path to knowledge and find out what is up God’s skirt.”

“There is something you might not know about the reason why you are needed by the church supporters..”

“And what might that be?”

“Politics. A Bill for congress. A bill that will give them the power to control the police and the army on moral grounds.”

“What? What are you saying?” He frowns. “Why wouldn’t I know about this?”

“Far be it for me to spread rumours, Señor Morris, but there are many organizations in the world with agendas of their own. There are racial groups, religious groups, clubs and elites.”

“That’s not a reason.” He smiles. “I had my suspicions.”

“Did you know that the Basque people are a unique race, with a special interest in their identity?”

“The Neanderthals?”

"No, Neanderthals are what crawls out of a British pub at closing time. You are possibly thinking of the Cro Magnon theory."

"Right."

She is flirting with him now, but Den can see that it would be futile to reciprocate. She has him in the palm of her very well manicured hand and he is humbled by her mastery of him.

"So planning these threads is a very complicated business."

"*Recuerderos de La Alhambra*," she says.

"I'm sorry?"

She sends him a long hard look, some of that warmth leaking away. She suppresses an almost pitying chill that tells him that she thinks he is an uncultured barbarian. Then her face softens as if she forgives him his ignorance in the passing of a single moment.

"It is a piece of guitar music. Very difficult to play." Her eyes are fiery in intensity. "It is a marathon of tremolo passages as intricate as the mosaics and as sweeping as the gardens of the Alhambra palace. It requires a feat of manual dexterity and endurance that few players possess. At the same time it requires great delicacy of interpretation. It is easy to make it sound like a computer program or a gatling gun. The nuances require great skill. Playing the piece is a challenge, but the status that being able to play it brings to musicians is worth perhaps more than the piece itself."

"You are not saying the piece doesn't have any intrinsic artistic value?"

"Of course not. But always with a piece of art, there is more than the sum of the parts. Perhaps it is also a lesson? Remember what happened to the Islamic Empire in Granada." She pauses to study his response as if evaluating his performance. No, nothing there. "The Alhambra was created as a palace of financial, artistic and cultural splendour in the thirteenth century. It was conquered first by the Christians and then by Tourists. Now it is a theme park, devoid of dignity."

"There is dignity in culture, surely."

"Tourism is not culture. It is consumerism. Anyway, we digress. I think you are not so much fascinated by the piece as by the status that it brings. For you it is not the art, but the ownership. You are an art dealer, not an artist."

Den regards her with a curiosity. He is uncertain as to whether he has been insulted or simply provoked.

"My point is that we must be cautious and subtle. What we must do to reverse the influence of ignorance is not merely create prestige projects, we must master the delicacy of art. Not mass produced consumer messages, but seductive melodies."

Den responds to the change in her. She seems more attractive to him now. She has boiled off an outer protective layer and her defences have been partially lowered. He considers what he should do. If this is his chance to maximize his

importance in the game business, then he should try to win her approval. On the other hand, she is interesting and clearly motivated. Can she even see me? he wonders.

“What about the game then?” he suggests. “Do you think it is a good thing or a bad thing? You were at the meeting in San Diego, so you must have some interest in the game?” Unconsciously, he uses a body language that he uses when interested in a woman for quite different reasons. It is involuntary, but she notices and wriggles in her chair, pulling her jacket lapels closer together, as if in discomfort.

He kicks himself mentally. *Not now, idiot.*

“Games are like glue,” she says, more coldly. “Civil governments want to do gluon engineering. They want to win back hearts and minds, and bind everyone together with a message of freedom and, above all, authority. They want your allegiance, not to a flag, but to their manifesto.”

“And they want to exploit this glue to galvanize support for the Bill?”

“Today everyone is more desperate. They can see what is going on. They want to bind people back together into a stable society—the old fashioned kind, in which they are still boss. They see a massive de-centralization of power, made possible by our communications technology, and they want to reinstate their centralization of power and ideology. They want people to bow down to them again, to put it crudely. They still need a basis in law.”

“So what is it that you want? I am confused about whether you agree with that or disagree.”

“What are we really talking about – what they are asking you to help them do – is to spread messages, not simple slogans but more complex psychological iterations. The timing will be critical. When the people are asked to vote with their mobiles, they want the answer to be ‘yes’. It is more like training a dog than lecturing to a crowd.”

“That’s them. What about you?”

“I want the ideology, which is spread, to be one that is based on critical discussion, ideas, crazy passions and rational thinking, all together – not pea-brained propaganda and certainly not if it leads to a massive increase in power for the forces of ignorance.” Her hands reach out, as if she is holding a child. “The game is the key. Science, research, call it what you like: these are all just a forms of *play*. Intellectual recreation. Kids who never grew up. It is advanced play with discipline. It is about playing games of a different kind: intelligence games, creative games. It’s about asking other people to decipher your puzzle. Without these games, the human spirit of exploration stops. We are just . . . clay.”

“So you think the game is a good thing? Even if it is being used for broadcasting someone’s ideology?” Idiot, that is what she just said. He tries, too late,

to give the appearance of someone going over the facts, rather than someone asking questions.

She seems to be losing patience. "Play is a good thing. Active creativity – not passive consumerism, not edicts from the church. On the other hand, we must be cautious of how we rate the outcome of that creativity. The power of an idea should not be underestimated. It has happened many times throughout history: an idea is flung around the world, impinging on these individuals like a cosmic pinball game. Somehow, because the idea joins people together, implicitly, their lives become intertwined. It blossoms and spreads. Is that good or bad? I think it simply happens. You cannot necessarily judge the outcome in advance."

"But you need a big enough mixture of ideas, a big enough gene pool to choose from."

"Yes, I agree. And we keep that gene pool alive by fostering a spirit of playing and learning. We are not saying that children will be singing songs of science, and we certainly don't want them praying to Darwin."

"Not ignorant acceptance," he agrees, as the thought percolates into his deeper consciousness, beyond the surface banter. "The human spirit."

"Ignorance is only good for corruption," she points out. "It breeds mobs, by whatever name. The mob wants to keep its own group strong, and everyone else weak and vulnerable. The real heroes of any age are the artists and thinkers who passionately follow their path of discovery. Discoverers. How can we stand still without them? We are used to change now. It has to happen. It is the theory of the Red Queen. Do you know it? That we have to run very fast to stand still?"

He shakes his head. "Perhaps you can tell me about it over dinner sometime, when we are more relaxed."

"We do not have time for that," she snaps in admonishment.

"Well, one day when we have more time." He is tired and his sense of winning this encounter is slipping away.

What is it I'm trying to win though?

"Cristo," she mutters. "Tell me something, Mr. Morris, I am curious as to what they are asking you to do. Especially the pro-church lobby. They are asking you to work for them, no? Let me see, I am guessing that they have a two-layered strategy. The anti-abortion propaganda is a constant distraction. Not that. They have their fixed campaigns, and then they have other more surreptitious campaigns which are less visible. I think it is this. But your speciality is in smart surfaces."

He decides a conciliatory approach. "In the game, they are talking about using it as a form of government. They are talking about consolidating government into a single globalized entity."

"I see. It is not very realistic is it?"

"I suppose not?"

"A world government would have to be a pretty symbolic affair. You cannot force every decision, every ruling through a single bottleneck. It couldn't possibly work. Though I suppose you can have a media figure that talks about high level goals, common ethical standards and so on. . .certainly. A figurehead."

She makes the idea ridiculous. They have become opposing sparring partners again, not team players on the same side.

"We have learned the need to distribution of effort, devolution of control."

"Isn't centralization a sign of strong leadership?"

"No, no. It's no good at all. The trouble with the old centralized system, which is essentially bureaucratic, is that it cannot solve problems – increasing bureaucratic controls simply creates more and more preconditions for corruption. It is the paradox of government. The more you try to control, the more of it slips through the back-door by abuse of privilege."

Den tries to reverse the change of mood by her offering something.

"This must remain between the two of us," he tells her.

She nods, eyes cutting into him again.

"The campaign they want is broad. Everything from billboards to role playing. It is image creating in a way that makes people look away from the real things that they are doing, and it keeps the masses satisfied."

"Yes. Good. Tell me more."

He tells her about the meeting he had with the splinter group. He shouldn't, but he needs to win points with her.

I am not good at keeping secrets, he thinks, thinking of Cathy Kim.

"We have only started to discuss strategy. We have some doubts about wanting to be involved at all."

"There are many ways to control people," she muses.

"The approach is not likely to be anything radical. It's all standard tricks. Encouragement, guilt, contrary instruction. You know, tell people not to do X, so that you can guarantee certain groups will do both X and X-squared."

"Will it be enough?"

"We usually do okay in these campaigns."

"Will you truly activate people's minds? From poets to technicians? We need sufficient diversity of skills and understanding to survive into the coming generations. That requires a long term commitment, a deep investment."

"The money is there."

"The preeminent paradigm of our time is: short term return. This is precisely why things are falling apart now. Get rich quick, as the American's say!"

He lifts his head wearily. "No adverbs."

She returns his enigmatic remark by regarding him curiously.

Never mind. "I have understood your point." He wants to call her by a name, but he is not sure what she would allow him to call her. Ms Cortina? Connie?

They could all backfire. "You are saying that we need more complex messages for people to absorb, to reach out to peoples' intelligent side."

"Make people smarter, Señor Morris. We must all play a role in this. "

"Advertising is supposed to be a simple message though, unambiguous. . ."

"It doesn't have to be. Compare advertising from different countries. There is a world of difference, no?"

He recalls his recent experience in San Diego with toothpaste and agrees. "Yes, of course, marketing campaigns can make mistakes sometimes—putting all their eggs in one basket. The one size fits all idea. Lowest common denominator. It never really works, but it is cheap."

"The money is there."

"Sometimes a counter information campaign works," he mutters on. "Scandal? No, there's too much noise in the paparazzi these days to make a scandal work. Everything is a scandal."

"Even during the cold war, the days of large scale overt propaganda, we had more complex ways of making us believe we were better than the other side. There pomp and circumstance of ceremony. Showing that your army, your, uniform, your headquarters are bigger than the other side's."

"We are a ceremonial culture in Europe," he recites.

"Ceremony addresses our spiritual needs, without having to be religious."

He nods, losing himself in all of these thoughts.

My god, he thinks. Perhaps she is right. Perhaps I am already too dumb to manage this.

He sighs, feeling suddenly exhausted. A final show of weakness. He looks her up and down once more, admiring her strength. She notices his wandering and sighs herself.

"Think with your mind, Señor Morris. Education is vital to our future. Society is dumbing down too quickly. You need to help us change that. I ask you to bear this in mind when you are working for these groups. Don't let them succeed in making society stupider."

"I'll think about what you've said," he says.

She looks grave for a fraction of a second, so that Den feels as though he has hit a nerve. Then her expression lightens and she smiles. "And now I have other things to attend to, so you will have to excuse me."

She rises, as if commanding him to do the same. His renewed posturing has managed to annoy her, he can tell.

"Do you want to make a follow up appointment?" he asks. "Perhaps you would like to visit me in London?"

She snorts, like a compassionate bull in the ring, smiling at the witless Mator out of pity. "I think that will not be necessary."

He examines her cold planar face, looking for a hint that she might be impressed by some aspect of him.

The meter reads zero.

“I’ll show you out now, Mr. Morris.”

40

Dermot collapses at his desk. He should really work, but he is exhausted now. After fending off all the pedestrians in the busy streets, winding himself up over Christina, and going without sleep for several nights. It has drained him mentally and physically. With almost compulsive futility, he checks his messages one more time, sizing his own predicament; it is one of desperation.

I am a useless dependent, he thinks.

In the wild aftermath, after civilization fell, he would be dead meat. He would not survive without his computer. It isn’t really like a VR game, is it? It’s much harder without clear rules and a portable pizza oven. His combo subjects him to more humiliation:

THE WORLD IS YOUR OYSTER!

ONLY YOU CAN MAKE YOUR DREAMS COME TRUE!

So much for inspiration. Thanks for the support.

He has come to the crime team’s offices, seeking refuge from his colleagues who have been taunting him and making him an object of fun, ever since he let slip about Christina. Seeking refuge in work is not always a story for success. He is still too agitated. There is adrenalin coursing through his veins, as if he is really a comic book nobody undergoing a transformation to superhero.

What is happening to my body? Got. . .to. . .eat. . .radioactive. . .spider!

It cannot continue. He has to do something. Bundling his fears, he punches the number into the combo and calls. It rings four times.

“Hello?” Christina’s voice says. She sounds confused or even annoyed as if she was not expecting anyone. Perhaps she was sleeping? It’s not late.

“Eh, hello, Christina, it’s eh me . . . Dermot.”

"Oh hi," she says, apparently relaxing. Perhaps she has forgotten about him until now.

"So what are you doing?"

"Nothing much." The television is playing in the background.

"I wondered if you'd like to meet. I have that part for your computer."

There is a slight pause and her voice becomes evasive. "Oh, no, I can't. It's such a mess here."

"I don't mind. Really. That doesn't matter."

He hears a laugh, a male voice, in response to some audience laughter on the television. She has company.

"I need to clean up first. I'll call you another time."

Adrenaline blindness. The room spins a little. "Okay," he says simply.

"Okay, bye." She cuts off the connection.

He feels numb and ridiculous. Lonely.

*

Preeta knocks hesitantly at his office, as if detecting his discomfort.

"Are you okay?" she asks.

He turns his head away, and tries to look busy. "Uh, yeah. What can I do for you?"

She cocks her head. "You look even paler than usual. You could use a break."

"You look . . ." He considers lashing out, but reins himself in, like a good dog, snatching a glance at her. "Nice." She probably doesn't mean to be butting in on his affairs. It was a kind gesture to ask about him.

"Thank you very much," she says with the very cute Indian lilt. "You know, I was wondering if you wanted to go out this evening. I haven't had a chance to do anything like this for a long time. While I am here I want to sample the nightlife here, feel as though I am actually alive."

Yes, alive. What is that exactly? "I am pretty busy. . ."

"It looks as though you could do with a night off."

"Yes." He nods, mainly to himself. He is not doing anything useful. "Yes, I could."

She edges her way into his office a little further, without invitation. She is trying to be nice to him. Why? Anyway, he should be grateful.

"Did I tell you what I found out?"

"What?"

"I am not a real person."

Dermot looks at her, wondering what she is trying to say. "Well, don't ask me. I can't tell the difference."

She grins, and he is forced to laugh at his own remark.

"I am a character in someone's game."

The humour drains out of him. "So, are you going to explain that, or just leave me guessing?"

"I found out. Your boss is part of a network that has been manipulating me, choreographing my moves ever since I started working on the game in Malaysia."

"What? Why?"

"From what I can tell, they needed someone under cover to get inside the information in the game."

"A spy?"

"An involuntary spy."

"A stooge."

"I suppose it amounts to that, doesn't it? You know the strangest thing about it?"

"What?"

"I don't really care."

"You don't care?"

She shrugs. "No, I don't care."

"Why not, I mean. . ."

She meets his gaze. "I'm better off, aren't I?"

He can identify with that.

"Do you think that attack on you was set up too?"

"What!?" A bolt of disgust breaks her expression. She gasps, bordering on a scream.

"The attack. You said you were kidnapped, I mean. Right?"

"What? You mean, it could have been engineered to bring me here?"

"Just an idea. What better way to make you help them than to make you think that a well-known enemy is out to get you. They step in to the rescue and bring you here. It all seems very convenient. " There is a quiver in his voice, as if he realizes that he has gone too far.

Her eyes are wide and she precesses like a gyroscope in the doorway. "Would someone arrange an attack on me to manipulate me?"

"Well, we might do something like that in a game. So, I mean, you know, it could. . . It was just a thought."

"Shut up! Don't say it!"

"Just thinking out loud, sorry."

*

The thought requires processing, but she drops it for now like a hot coal.

Not processing, not processing. No, no, no, no, no.

Not an idea to be entertained in her current frame of mind. Go away.

Dermot sees effect of the idea on her and feels responsible. Best to change the subject. "So anyway. That thing we are supposed to be doing now,"

"Stopping the Christians. . ."

"Yes." He suppresses an instinct to correct the details of what she said. That is a bad habit, a geek habit. That is not who he wants to be.

"What about it?"

"Got anywhere?"

She stares sulkily into space. "I was looking around and I had an idea."

"What?"

She does not look happy. She came here perhaps to cheer him up and he has cut her down and made her feel as bad as he does.

"Would you like some tea?" he asks. "It's from the Cameron Highlands, in Malaysia."

Her trance breaks and she smiles with conciliatory eyes. "Thanks. That sounds nice. On one condition."

"What?"

"You have to come out with me later, to a bar."

A smile forms between them.

"All right then," he says happily. This is progress. This is good. He has reached out and she accepted. Perhaps it doesn't have to be so hard, after all. "Let me make some tea."

"Black or green?" she asks.

"Black, plain or with vanilla."

She smiles. "Plain, please. So, something else. I found a connection using my software. Some people here in Oslo who are working on environmental robots. They have some of the technology that we need. I don't know how it works, but I figured that Bishop was going to want to know about it."

"You told him?"

"Yes. He rushed off."

Dermot is impressed. He would never have thought of that. She has been there for a couple of weeks now and already she is more imaginative than he is.

*

Consternation, over the ulcerated fabric of the city, racks his mood as they venture out into the chill winter vapours. It does not do to see the repairs that maintain the city's appearance. No one wants to know of blemishes on the perfection of things. Pockmarks in the asphalt foundations are quietly being steam-rollered into denial by night-workers, under halogen illumination and flashing amber. The city is sinking into a marsh; like Atlantis, he thinks. How long do we have?

The homeless are hanging in the recesses of shuttered shop doorways now, as if driven out of their usual haunts by a gathering storm. Dermot's mobile indicates that there is a police alert in the city tonight. A football game. That means there will be police everywhere. It is seldom that he ventures out of a tram or a bus at this time of day, in such caustic air. Besides, he is usually working. Dermot the action hero.

They are five puffed up blimps feeling their way forward, towards the a place rumoured to be known to one of them, none of them certain of where they are going. They are a blind gang leading a stranger through the night; rosy cheeks, slapped by the winter.

There should be more people here, shouldn't there? Is it safe to be out at this time of day?

He feels conspicuous, walking with such a large group, avoiding cracks in the paving. They are standing out too much. The few people around are watching them. Where are the police? Why can't they see any police? If they are suppose to be out in force, why aren't they here?

As if to laugh at him, a black cat shifts in a shadow, raised momentarily from its smug camouflage by the tenderest kiss of ambient light.

"Let's get out of here and go out tonight," Preeta said.

"You go ahead. I'll join you later maybe. I need to prepare something first."

"Come on, Dermot," Preeta said. "Take a break. Let's go out and have a good time!" She smiled, bearing a wicked streak. "I've always been a bit of a rebel, you know."

Preeta said, Preeta said. What was he thinking? He had been absorbed by his work for almost a full day, but the suggestion arrested his thoughts abruptly. It touched a primal contact within him, unleashing a spark of arousal. It would be good for him to get out and see people in a social situation. His heart beat suddenly to the rhythm of a different drum.

Dermot seemed to glide down the corridor without feeling his feet touch the ground. He could have been floating or levitating from the attention; if he were only attached to reality at all he might have realized that all he was missing was the very cause of his elation. But he was feeling good, on a cloud, and every worldly tether seemed beyond him at that moment. Break free—burn the candle at both ends. Progress.

But now his nerve is shaken. After work activity is not common here. People are usually just glad to get home at the end of a day. *We do not know how to socialize.* Some of the older people have families and the younger people just aren't in the habit. This is breaking new ground.

Their short walk passes, free of incident and they arrive in a small side street amongst a few shops which nest in the ground floors of the four-story flats: the restaurant is really not that far from the police building. Dermot observes a pub

next door filled with long and flamboyant leather coats, and black dyed hair, boots and metallic studs. It is a room that seems removed from the rest of this Asian area, like a puzzle to be solved, but he is not in the game now. It must be a real meeting place for these black haired denizens. He begins to feel daring.

Little Saigon. The restaurant is not very James Bond. There are no glamorous dresses and shirt-tails, no roulette tables and exotic bars. The brown Formica tables and orange plastic seats belong to a different stratum and age, but the food is tasty. Garlic and chilli, wrapped in plastic, peanuts and mint, crunch inside his mouth. Small candles flicker in appreciation of their custom.

"This place is amazingly cheap," someone says. "And the food is good and the beer is cheap."

"You want a beer Preeta?"

"I've never tried beer before".

"Really?"

She shrugs. "Okay, I'll try a small one."

Preeta and Dermot.

World-lines crossed.

She does not know all the faces at the table, but as she drinks the strangely sour liquid, with her food, the unfamiliarity seems to matter less.

She feels important: a meal in her honour.

I am not dead here.

"So welcome to our country," one of the group announces, raising his glass.. Unknown face. A friend of Jonathan. "The land of taxidermy and taxes plenty. Skål!"

"What do you make of our crime team? All the little students and boffins?"

"Everyone seems very nice."

"She's too polite!"

"Prima, no, what's your name?"

"Preeta."

"We heard you are a wiz with the diagnostics."

"I have had lots of practice," she tells them modestly.

"So is it true that you have to work twice as many hours in Malaysia?"

She smiles. "Not yet."

"And do they put you in jail if you spit on the ground?"

"That's Singapore, idiot!"

"Not even a whipping?"

"Well, that must make it the opposite of here." Ivar. "Here we spit all the time and work half the time."

"No one gets anything done here," Dermot mutters. "We don't put in the hours. Too much free time and vacation."

"Look who's talking! When was your last vacation, Dermot?"

He squirms. "Not for a while."

"This man works two jobs. You need a life, my man."

"I have a life, thanks," he replies with a trace of anger.

Preeta sips her beer and feels a creeping numbness, almost like a pain that does not hurt, somewhere in her brain. The world is simpler; details do not seem to matter as much. It is as though something has clasped her head and she is wearing it.

The boss-lady of the house inspects their table over the top of her glasses and shouts something in Vietnamese. Anything else for you? Peanuts and noodles. This is a taste of home, in an unlikely igloo. Location stored for future reference.

Time gets gobbled up like spring-rolls, their infused and weary bodies supported in the uncomfortable chairs. Dermot goes quiet as usual, and seems to be anxious to go somewhere else. How long have they been sitting here? It is 23:00 hours and the conversation is beginning to peter out. Preeta is tingling and she does not want the evening to end yet.

"You know, I should go," Dermot says.

"But we are about to plan our work for the next week," Jonathan jokes.

"Yeah – let me know. Uh – nice to meet you all. Preeta, I guess I'll see you tomorrow."

"No, you can't go now," Ivar complains. "Preeta wanted a night out, Look, why don't we go and have one more drink at this bar just around the corner. By then, we might be all finished."

"I am pretty tired."

"Preeta, you'll come with us won't you?"

She nods, dizzily. "Yes, I would like that. Dermot, you should come too. Just for a little while?"

He checks his mobile, demonstratively for an excuse to leave. There is none.

Preeta puts a hand on his shoulder and tugs at his jacket. "Just for a little while?"

He squeaks inside. And what if he doesn't come? Will she go home with one of the others? Will he have missed an opportunity? No, he cannot think like that.

"Come on, Derm! Come with us for another half-litre."

Trapped. He nods, "Okay," and is rewarded by Preeta's broad smile.

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They walk back out into the cold night, sounds of drunken shouting and distant, swooshing cars. Just a few blocks towards Young's Square and then slip into a bar. It is a dimly lit place, with small tea-candles flickering at the tables. The bar itself is brightly lit: row upon row of coloured bottles, with luminous and animated labels line the shelves at the bar. Colours, shapes and sizes. Each

label is trying to attract attention with its kaleidoscopic antics. Which of these appeals to you most? Some of the drinks can even change colour, or is it the bottles?

They occupy a table in the shifting half-spaces.

"We have to go up to the bar to get drinks here. I'll go first," Jonathan informs.

Unfathomable sound: it is a cacophony of fragmented voices, coming from everywhere at once, like a flock of squawking birds. It reverberates around every corner of the establishment, devolving into a flat mixture of meaningless jabber. Too much information is simply noise. Superposed onto this nocturnal aviary is music, which beats out a simple pulsing rhythm, something to focus on if not to listen to. It is like a string of buoys on the ocean, or a ladder up the smooth side of a skyscraper; it is a crutch for gaining purchase on the otherwise featureless audio.

"Oh my god," Ivar chants.

It is amazing that a single voice can be heard over this din, truly a testament to the power of the human brain to focus on a single message when shrouded in static. This is Bishop's doctrine in action, Dermot thinks.

"Have you seen that skirt?"

Their attention is drawn to a pair of black legs, terminated in the merest slip of a loin-cloth.

"Now that's how you get someone's attention."

They laugh, though the sound is laced with a nervous strain.

"She's beautiful," she mouths.

"It's probably been patented."

"Take a picture and send it to Bishop. This could be the start of a whole new theory of grabbing attention. If we equipped all the WPCs with this equipment, it would bring power back into the hands of the law. No one would be able to say no to them."

"No kidding."

Small groups of mainly male or of female friends, are scattered around. They are not exotically dressed, at least not most of them. Jeans and sweaters. It is low-key, informal. Preeta sees football colours and shirts on one table, making a noise. She can see a few couples, but this does not seem to be the place for romantic encounters. The women seem to offer one another vacuous hugs and air kisses as they meet.

"It's like the girl in the honeypot," Preetha says.

Dermot glances at her, with a barely posed curiosity.

"One of her tricks for getting attention. Sexy clothes that promise more than they reveal."

"Right," Ivar chimes.

"Hey, do you remember that woman, a witness in a robbery case last year. She took like seventy megabytes of pictures and sound in the name of fashion or something."

"Fashion?"

"Yeah. Apparently she thought this woman, in front of her in the shop, was so cool that she recorded her just walking around. Then suddenly the woman did a runner: robbed the store."

"People still rob stores?"

"Of course they do."

"Not cash: detergent. She stole some expensive detergent, for a cleaning company, I think it was."

"All right, let's cut out the work talk everyone. This is our night out."

"So is this our final destination?"

"We probably shouldn't be out too late," Dermot warns. "There's been a football match. There might be trouble."

"Yeah, I heard Ullevål lost on their home turf. They are probably breaking up the pubs on Karl Johan as we speak."

"Who cares?"

"Most of the city."

"Perhaps we should find more of a dance club, where they are not likely to go."

"Yes!" Preeta exuberates. "I have heard all about the Kan-Klubs. Can't we go dancing?"

"We don't know how to dance."

"Neither do I," she says. "But we can watch?"

"We can all watch."

"Yes we can, and that skirt is just asking for a picture. I didn't bring a cam. Derm, do you have one?"

He shakes his head.

Liar.

Preeta peels off several layers of clothing. The transition from the outdoor cold to heat of the bar has welled up in a considerable surplus of internal radiance.

"So, you didn't finish. I'm guessing they caught this chick with the detergent."

"Yeah, they did. And the funny thing is, it turns out that she is part of one of these Christian cults from Sweden."

"A Swedish sex cult!"

They woo in unison.

“Yeah, probably. Religion with sexual gratification. Then they send the women out to clean offices and buildings all over the city. It is some sort of turf-war with the Turks.”

Preeta looks around questioningly. “Turks?”

“There’s a lot of Turkish and Algerian immigrants who work in the cleaning industry. It’s one of our failings in Scandinavia. No one wants to do the dirty jobs, so we have to get immigrants to do them for us. But some of the Christian groups are anti-Muslim so they try to squeeze them out of the market.”

“It’s sanctioned racism,” Jonathan says, returning from the bar with a couple of beers.

There is a sudden roar of enthusiasm from the table of football supporters.

“Hey-ho. Looks like the tribe is about to go hunting.”

Dermot looks uncomfortably at the table.

“Looks like a bug in your software, Dermot. I think they belong in a different game.”

“I wish,”

“You could go over and re-program them a little?”

“Avatars are easier to understand,” he mumbles and consults his mobile, checking the state of police reports for good measure.

Ivar laughs. “Understatement of the century.”

“Have you ever been to the football?”

“Sure.”

“Really?”

He nods.

“That’s what we like about you Dermot. You talk too much!”

Preeta: “Stop teasing him.”

Dermot looks at her and shakes his head once, sneaking a glance at her as she peels off a sweater, leaving only a snugly fitting, white T-shirt hugging her torso. Then he regrets the discomfort: she is beautiful and exotic, he thinks. The clothes accentuate that.

His mind races at once at the thought of what it might be like . . . No, now he is getting confused. He is already seeing Christina. Well, who is he kidding? He is not “seeing” anyone. And Christina is trouble, he knows it, but he is ensnared. What a mess.

He shakes his head as if to clear it.

“Are you okay?” Preeta asks, smiling at his involuntary grimace.

“I’m fine, sorry. Just a little tired.” Now pull yourself together, he thinks. Don’t force it. Stop trying to make things happen. It puts people off.

A girl comes to the table, wearing a promotional nano-shirt.

“Can I get you folks something from the bar?” she asks. “We have a special promotion this evening on these items.” She points to her T-shirt, where a picture

of the relevant substances is displayed. "I can get you one of these, or one for each of you at half-price."

"I'll have a beer," Ivar says flatly.

"Regular drinks at the bar," she sing-songs. "Or shots of any of these drinks at half-price if more than two of you join in."

"Why not?" Jonathan's friend pipes in. "Something exotic."

"We'll try a shot of the Russian Oil, all 'round."

She pulls a bottle from a belt on her waist, and produces five plasticized shot-glasses of some black potion, apparently from thin air.

"Here we are." She taps on her wristband. "Okay, I'm broadcasting on pay and . . . I'm ready for five responses. One, two. . ."

They tap at their mobiles to pay. She thanks them and leaves.

"All right, people. Let's make a skål for new police skirts!"

"Preeta, you have to down this in one!"

Dermot cuts in. "You don't have to."

"Yes you do! Mob rule. Everyone!"

They raise their glasses, some more confidently than others, salute and empty. Dermot sips and Preeta gulps.

Preeta sputters and coughs.

"Shit, that's disgusting," Dermot winces.

Gasps and grins.

"I think I would like something else," Preeta laughs.

"Shall I get you something? I know what you should try. . ."

"Give me a minute first." She can already feel the effect of the slug of alcohol changing something inside her, as though some dragon buried within her is flexing with its fires. If they are trying to push her into a single role, make her one of them, like a slave girl, then they are mistaken. That is what she has been running from all her life.

"So is someone going to tell me? What is a Swedish sex cult?" she asks.

They look at one another and laugh.

"Are you interested?"

"How can I know, if you don't tell me about them?"

"The sex cults. That's religion with sex and manipulation."

"We have them here too, just for the record."

"Where is the religion in it?"

"It's ceremonial. Same thing really."

"They are basically Christian Bible bashers, like fundamentalists, but they live in closed quarters, usually with some kind of confidence trickster nutcase at the helm."

"He's usually a dictator, and he gets people to cleanse their filthy sins by having sex with him, or in groups, or whatever."

"Them and their small son's and daughters."

"And Bishop would like to exterminate them all."

"You shouldn't make fun of Bishop."

"Why not?" Ivar laughs. "The guy is a little over-serious at times."

"You make him sound like the fanatic. This sounds awful."

"Man with a mission."

"Rumour has it that someone in his family got taken in by one of the cults once, but it's just a rumour."

"We haven't come very far in moving his project forward. Too many other things to work on to fight something as abstract as fighting a brainwashing campaign."

Preeta shakes her head imperceptibly.

"Yeah, we still don't know how to do it. At least, I can't think of the goddamn answer."

"What about you, Dermot? How would a game designer seduce someone or counter-seduce someone from the clutches of the enemy?"

Dermot is feeling calmer from the ingestion of alcohol. He risks an answer. "Bishop tells us that the church is gaining ground, but I have never understood it. People are selfish today – why would they invest in something like a church, where there is a congregation you have to take care of, unless it gave them something for free? You have to believe that people are basically cynical, not that they're saints. I just don't get it."

"You don't have to understand it," Jonathan says. "But it's definitely happening."

"The religions are carving up Africa pretty effectively," Jonathan's friend chimes. "Islam in the North and the Evangelicals and Catholics fighting it out in sub-Saharan. Maybe people feel that it gives them direction or a sense of family, when there is no sense of safety from government?"

"People have extended families in the game. Virtual family has never been more popular. What do they want with religion in this day and age?"

"People want to be looked after. That has to be why presidential figures are revered, even when people disapprove of their politics. People actually want someone to stand up and tell them that everything is all right."

"And that's the point, isn't it? Now it is falling apart. The trust has gone out of the presidential figures, so religious figures see their chance to step in again."

"The point is that they don't see any benefits from central government, so they live like mobs and tribes, like in Africa. Then you can have any local zealot as your local leader, with his own agenda."

Dermot's weariness is starting to fade. He feels that he is beginning to get the hang of being out. The tiredness is passing. He has caught his second wind.

"Preeta, do you know what you want to drink?"

She shakes her head.

"There is so much to choose from. I don't know where to start."

"Did you like the beer you had?"

She shrugs. "It was interesting."

"Why not try a cocktail?" Jonathan suggests.

"All right. I would like a blue drink," she says.

They laugh.

"How about a margarita with that blue stuff?" Ivar says.

"Will you come with me and tell me what to ask for?"

"Ehmm. Have to give me a minute on that." He runs it up on his mobile and shows her a picture on a tablet. "This?"

Dermot says, "I'm going to the bar anyway. Come on, I know what it is."

The place is filling up now and there is a crowd at the bar. Preeta feels a body pressing into hers, She smells the lactic sweat and wafts of pot-encrusted jackets. Clothes, boring and beautiful. Make-up, scents, body language. Everyone is signalling and sending their messages, flagging their identity and their hopes, trying to influence their surroundings.

If they are talking about how to turn people from the church, the answer must surely lie in this melting pot of signals. The room is literally bursting with audio-visual button-pushing. Bishop would love this.

Dermot's thoughts parallel her own. The noise in the room hinders his thinking. How do you turn such a mass of noise into something more structured, like a symphony? That is what everyone is trying to do.

Suddenly, from the noise, Preeta hears what she instantly perceives to be a scream. Turning her head, a space opens up behind where they are standing, and people seem to simply evaporate from their positions at the speed of sound. A body, a person, comes tumbling backwards, as if in slow motion, growing in her field of vision, and crashes into the bar beside her, with a man practically on top of him. Like dogs, like animals. One at the throat of the other. They are fighting.

Preeta feels the thud of the man on the wooden bar. Fists pummel into his face and his nose spatters blood. Suddenly there are two groups fighting at several locations. The patrons have scattered to the edges of the room, like Russian Oil expelled by a detergent.

The scene has a sickening presence. It is not like watching a bar-fight in a film, with fake punch noises over-dubbed and balsa-wood furniture that breaks like tissue paper. The real sound of violence is a hollow smack, as flesh gives way to sudden impact, followed by the splatter of thin red blood onto the wooden floorboards, drying in little craters, which darken to crimson. There is the shattering thunder as furniture and bodies crash to the wooden floor. Finally there is the swoosh and thump as one thug takes a chair and tries to break it over the back of his adversary, imitating the scenes he has learned from Hollywood Westerns.

But, unlike in the movies, it is not the chair that breaks. The man goes down and does not come up.

In a moment, the fighters have finished their ambush and have vacated the bar, leaving moaning and bleeding bodies around them. The panic button has doubtless been pressed, and police will be on their way. The thugs disappear into the night, perhaps to pick another fight elsewhere.

In the aftermath, the pounding music is suddenly apparent, ridiculously cheery under the circumstance. All voices have desisted. A space remains, buoyed by the shock of sudden violence. No one says anything, but two of the bar staff go to see if the groaning bodies are all right.

Preeta is frozen in position, standing up with her hands between her legs, looking hurt.

“Are you okay. Did you wet yourself?”

She shakes her head.

The police were too far away. They could not come in time to stop this event. Luckily, this was apparently just between gangs. They are not interested in anyone else, except perhaps as spectators.

“You sure?”

“I don’t think I want any more to drink. Let’s just get out of here.”

They return to their table. As if they needed proof that the gangs are a more immediate problem. The gang violence has been a distraction lately. Bishop has been having a lot of discussions with the boys and girls in blue about it.

People diffuse away from the walls, still looking at the injured bundles of flesh and bone, lying broken on the ground, but essentially turning their backs on the incident¹ and carrying on with their evening. It is over now. Not their business. Soon it will be as if nothing has happened.

“I don’t get it,” Ivar says. “What it is with these people? What do they get out of this?”

“Animals.”

“Football supporters. They don’t like losing.”

“Yeah, I heard they lost on their home turf.”

“I am so sick of these freakin’ gangs,” Jonathan’s friend gasps.

“What is a gang anyway? How do you define it?” Jonathan struts.

His friend regards him wearily. “A bunch of people with a funny handshake, walking demonstratively down the middle of a street?”

“That’s the seventeenth of May!” Ivar laughs, to lighten the mood. “You’re thinking of marching bands!”

“Well, if they are not a splinter off civilized society’s block, I don’t know a better way to describe them!”

“There are all kinds of gang,” Dermot says simply.

Preeta shudders and takes the remainder of her Russian Oil and throws it back, as the others did, medicinally. Her eyes bulge a little and then she winces and coughs. Perhaps more of it will help to numb the trembling within her.

“Woou. Careful, girl. We need you to operate that new software you’ve put together.”

Dermot sees her and considers doing the same, but that would not be like him.

“The gangs are happening in Asia too. You have the indoctrination clinics, or Madrassas that offer free education to young men, turning them into stooges for Islamic extremism. . .and there are Hindu gangs.”

“Yeah, according to TerrorWatch, they actually teach them how to use weapons and infiltrate organizations. . .”

“Yeah, I read that too.”

“It’s a familiar equation: fear plus resources equals stupidity.”

Preeta does not feel like arguing in their defence. For all she knows, it might be true.

“Preeta, you don’t look very well. Are you okay?”

“I think we should leave,” Ivar says.

“Yeah. Let’s get out of here.”

They don their clothing and push their way out. Several others have been thinking the same thing, since the fight.

Preeta and Dermot huddle together, as they meet the icy air outside the bar.

“You two look like a sorry pair.”

“I’m just a little tired,” Dermot replies.

Off in the distance, they hear a dirge of male moaning, droning out a vacant melody *en masse*, as if celebrating certain brain-damage. It could only be the sounds of a post-pregnant football match. It booms out from a bar accompanied by vicious shouts and guttural roars. Dermot looks unnerved, but Preeta merely feels a distant disgust through her intoxication. They have seen the transformation from human male to rabid animal, all for the love of a high-tech pig’s bladder with spots on.

“I need to go and dance and feel happy,” Preeta says, giddily.

“Do you belly dance? Can I come and watch?” Jonathan’s friend. Idiot.

“Grow up,” Jonathan says.

“Don’t tell him to grow up. He’s trying.”

Preeta says: “Boys. Be nice. Anyway, for the record, we don’t ‘grow up’. We get worn down, we lose our sharp edges.”

“Woou.” They laugh.

She points her finger a little too pointedly. “We make compromises and accept society’s lowest common denominator package of values and . . . ideas because it saves us the effort of thinking for ourselves.”

They exchange significant glances.

"And on that note," she slurs. "I want to party. Come on, Dermot." She sets off in the direction of Grensen.

Ivar says. "We'd better look after those two." He calls after them. "You two are important to us, if we are going to get moving on Bishop's counter-campaign."

Preeta on the new software and Dermot with the programming. Better keep a clear head.

"Okay, first place we find," Preeta shouts, pointing to a couple of girls walking together. "Let's follow them."

*

From a line of decorated bodies, through a door bouncer control point, they descend into the underworld of a club. The stairway leads down past black painted bricks, spray painted with art and pseudo-graffiti. Posters are thrown up haphazardly, showing concerts and bands and coming attractions, overlapping and torn. A thunderous pumping of bass reaches up to them, as if they are entering a gigantic heart, giddy on speed.

The regular din of voice noise and laughter accompanies it. It is just the two of them now. Jonathan's friend had other plans, and Ivar was looking tired. Dermot too looks like a ghost, withdrawn and misplaced in this universe. She can see him looking around, as if trying to find the puzzle that he has to solve to get past this level of the game.

Preeta is sailing, as if on dream auto-pilot. She feels drawn to the sound, to the warmth. By luck, two bar stools are free. She throws her coat over one and sits there, Dermot beside her.

Dark Gothic phantoms glide around with stylish mobile bracelets and silver wires used for decoration. Coloured hair and gelled sculpture. Everyone is a painting. Everyone is a work of art.

The art is cold, she decides, not like eastern art. It is chilly and aloof, pretentious. They are gargoyles, not love elephants. If I were art, I would want to bring people together, she thinks. This is masculine art. It shoots its message outward and says 'fuck you'. Her art would be more feminine, more inviting and would say 'tell me about yourself'.

The pulsing of the lights, hypnotising, cleansing. Worries are excised. They order a simple beer and look around them. Dermot tries to say something a few times, but they have to press their faces close together and shout to be heard over the music.

He is sweet, she thinks, but too careful for me.

There are no hot men here, but look at the girls. Sexy girls everywhere, with amazing figures. She cannot help but gape. Feline bodies, twisting like

tornadoes, hugging an inner volcano in a tight shell; snaking like cobras, living vines. Their short-cut dresses reveal ribs and breasts, with coloured hair and knee high boots. Preeta is entranced. It was not like this in the subcontinent, where people are trying to conceal middle-age obesity with airy tents.

She feels the effect of the alcohol. It is a new sensation, like being in a dream. Perhaps dreaming is like being drunk?

There is a dance floor, raised slightly, a short distance away, behind a cage wall.

The pulsing rhythm seems to activate parts of her brain that her anaesthetised centres would normally reject as irrational, but the prickling of the alcohol simply makes it feel comfortable. It is like being in a womb. She feels an urge to kick.

“Do you want to dance?” she shouts.

Dermot smiles a no. Is he feeling the same effect?

I am here, she thinks. *I feel free, more free than I have ever felt*. She has journeyed half way around the world to be here. She turned her back on her friends, just like those people in the bar turned their backs on the victims of violence. She is transforming from a kind grey moth into a selfish butterfly, with colour. But why should she resist? Why should she care? What is there to lose. Only the strong survive. She has been trodden on all her life. Perhaps the road to happiness is not paved with good intentions at all. Perhaps you have to push others aside and look after yourself, because no one else will.

The notion spins inside her mind, like a rising cyclone. It seems to buoy her, lift her out of the dread and the guilt. What is there to feel guilty about? Look around, there is no guilt in this room. All she can see is a purging of responsibility. A cleansing of daily stresses. She wants to join in. She too wants to be purged of guilt.

Preeta gathers focus and smiles at Dermot.

“Come on,” she says and jumps off her stool.

Dermot shakes his head, shyly. He does not feel the spirit of freedom that courses through her veins. “Someone has to watch our things.”

She shrugs, too far down her path to change gear now.

She has arrived. She has seen the enemy and it is only her own inhibition. She pushes her way through the tightly packed crowd and jumps up onto the dance floor. The music is beating and people are swaying and singing. She does not know the words, but she wants to join in. She dances with hands raised and eyes closed, allowing the music to infuse her spirit. The movements are instinctive and primal. She does not care about appearances. Freedom has reached her mind, and freedom is not about control.

As she looks around her, seeing others in the same state of release, she recognizes the look. The look, the very image that she always wanted to imitate, it

is that carefree look of freedom. It is the face of not caring.

Just look at the beauty. The sexy bodies, writhing in their expansiveness, riding on their buoyancy, having shed their earthly burden. This is where she wants to be right now.

In front of her, in a black dress that clings to her body, with short blonde hair and a long, pale neck, she recognizes someone. Not their face, but their understanding. The blond girl grins at her and moves closer. Preeta grins back, happier than she has ever been, connecting with her chromatic opposite, unified by erasure of guilt and worry, worlds from distant galaxies brought together by music and beer.

They dance together, holding out hands to one another. They ripple and move together, as though they were both spirits yin and yang, lock and key. The girl moves forward and touches her. They slide together with eyes half closed, and kiss. Not a short kiss, but a long intense kiss, with tongue. A surge of excitement floods through her. How daring, how contraire! How unbelievably cool she is! Every part of her is aroused.

She turns to look back for Dermot. Then she sees the horrified road-kill at the bar, gaping in disbelief. The madness had carried her away, but why should she care?

Come on, she thinks, this is every boy's dream. Two girls instead of one. She lifts out her hand in a regal beckoning as she dances as if to invite him into an unholy trinity, inviting him to share in her adventure, but he is paralysed. This is way too much. It had taken all his daring to talk to her in the first place. Now the thought of parading in front of the entire club with two gorgeous women is just too much. She sees him crumble slightly, not quite able to understand what has happened or how he managed to get into this. Then his deflation turns to discomfort and panic and he turns to flee, to expunge the dream.

She wants to go to him, but the girl in front of her is now pressing in close running her hands down her back, which seems like an opportunity that is too good to miss. This is my adventure, she thinks. I can save him later.

III. WHITE CHRISTMAS

41

Imagine a conversation, the first words of a language. It begins simply, an embryo of clear statements: the exchanges of proper names and mutual humilities. Gradually the babble swells in sophistication, in context and convolution. It matures and crystallizes with its own grammar—a lattice to support and guide the organic growth of its ideas.

Then, as the rigidity of the lattice begins to feel small, life-giving dialogue strains against the captivity, flowering in defiance of an unwanted and resented structural conformity. An arms race begins, between the need to express more elaborate intellectual growth, and the need to package uncertainty in a safe scaffolding.

Layers of establishment accrete around the struggling organism, choking it. The beast collapses under the weight of a cancerous armour-plating. Bureaucracy, once the friend that supported the spindly shoots of adventure in their growth, has built a mausoleum for thought and creativity.

Rest not in peace, but in perpetual debt to the system: a mortgage of ever-outstanding yet mediocre reporting, ever queued up to exhaust the conversation, to stifle its power to innovate. This language, Jonas believes, is the language of administration.

*

Freezing fog has lain a veneer of perfectly smooth ice onto the ground. He cannot even make it up the slight incline. He sees a car attempt its start up and slide back down, sideways into a tree. No sense in trying to make it that way.

Jonas drives south, once again, following the snaking road out beyond the ring road, from the conference hotel. The road is still slippery, but the adaptive tyres are holding on to their promise for now.

The events of two days ago are still fresh in his mind. He has driven this route several times now, and it brings back awkward feelings.

He dropped Martin off with his mother, that day, just half an hour before she finished work. He told her that they could talk later, no time now, and that he had to rush off. She swallowed her anger for the time being, and it felt as though he had gotten off lightly.

It won't last long. She will remind him of it soon.

Something has changed in him since the experience. He has survived one attack on his life. What about the next one? Surely, feeling ones mortality makes one stronger.

Arriving back at the council offices, after his social seminar cleansing, messages queued up in the message centre lie in wait for him. He has officially taken a day's leave to wind down, but there is no escaping the next step. There lay the memo he was putting out of his mind. It calmly informed them all that the government had intervened and placed research back together with church matters, back as it was in the 1990s. Unlikely bed-fellows, thrust back into an irreligious union by the politics of fear.

He read his messages numbly, absorbing their content without letting them alter his spirit. What else could one do? Then he returned to the hotel retreat to unwind, in the pursuit of knowledge.

Jonas spent the next days making sense of things, using the social seminar as a base for this meditation. *What kind of society are we living in? Am I an outdated fossil, who should move over for a new age? Can I be so wrong in my beliefs? Can I just stand aside and let things fall into disarray?*

He arrives now at the offices in a new frame of mind. Hostility has gestated within him. He feels like a soldier resigned to the prospect of battle, intensely aware of failing to achieve any of his worldly goals. It is surely time to rectify that. But how does one fight an immovable object? A little civil disobedience?

I have to try to do something for Sara, he thinks. But what?

Perhaps it is time to put on his academic hat for a while. He should try to contact the project team for a start. He has no idea what is going on there. They just seem to have disappeared. He is still her advisor, after all. And what about Professor Hart? He might have some clout.

His intern, John, tells him: "I called a friend in embassy circles and he said that the American embassy has decided to go on alert due to some threatened action. The French are protesting at their behaviour and are playing silly buggers by going off in a huff. Now riots have started there and in Eindhoven too."

"This is what happens when governments and politics get involved in knowledge management."

"Can you try to find out what Professor Hart is doing at the moment. Is he in the country? Tell him about this development and the effect it is going to have on his research."

"Okay. I'm on it. Anything else?"

"I need to think. I going to need the details of our past agreements."

"Have you tried the archive?"

He nods. "It's worth a try."

"Oh, Jonas?"

"Yes?"

"A policeman has been trying to contact you. An American, I think. Bishop?"

"Ugh. That can wait."

He returns to his office to access the files, whose information is not available by mobile. Knowledge and experience are our saviours.

A functionary from the ministry, who has been loitering in the wings, sees him as he is leaving the building.

"Jonas Lindgren? I'm glad I found you."

The feeling isn't mutual.

"You were not at the meeting the other day."

"I was not."

"It was an important announcement."

"There was an emergency."

"But you must have seen the memo by now. You must have heard."

He nods sternly.

"Then I hope everyone is going to go at this with their full vigour."

"We have other things to clear up first."

"Like what?"

"Like research projects that are in full swing. People's lives that are being thrown into disarray because of this. I have a student who is stranded in the field, and a collaborative project with the space agencies that is already falling apart without your help. Somehow, I need to fix these things that have been broken."

"Jonas, why are you still working on this? You know that everyone is going to be working on the Africa project now."

"That doesn't come into force until the new year. I am still a scientist. Science can't just stop."

He laughs. He actually laughs.

"Then perhaps it's time do some real science and apply yourself to what the board has decided is our strategic focus."

Astronomy is 1derful.

"You are compromising my ability to work by trying to tell me how to progress."

And interesting 2.

"We have made the decision to focus on this environmental science."

The ear3voles around the sun. . .

"Famine relief is not environmental science."

"I hope you're not going to be difficult over this, Jonas."

"You are not doing anyone a favour with this, whatever you might think. People are going to rebel. You cannot simply freeze student fellowships. It's unethical."

He regards him pityingly for several seconds and says: "I'm going to send someone down to advise about the new administrative procedures. It should help you adjust to the new system. In future it won't be possible to let money

disappear into these non-approved sidelines. We want to make sure that we get the maximum amount out of our research.”

Jonas watches him leave.

*

Switch the mobile into interface mode, but combo is frozen. Nothing working. Dials the help desk and is deflected with nonsense. “I can’t interface to my combo.”

“Are you not running our system?”

“Of course I am. What else would I be running?”

“Might have installed something different.”

“No.”

“Then there must be something on your machine that is preventing the license server from giving you access.”

“What?”

“Have you downloaded any music or video? Or game modules?”

“No.”

“Have you viewed any pictures by non-registered artists.”

“Registered by whom?”

“Guess.”

“I don’t think so.”

“Well that is probably the cause. You will have to pay a license fee to whoever it is and then the data will probably be freed up and the conflict will be resolved.”

“Are you telling me that I can’t access my work because of some unwanted data that I have received, against my will, from someone I do not know that is forcing me to pay for a license that I don’t want?”

“Welcome to the future.”

Astronomy is Iderful. . .

“Forget it.”

*

“All I am trying to do is to get at our funding with the collaborative space project. My student has been refused access to funds that are legitimately hers.”

“Our rules say that we need co-authorization from at least one other partner. Russians, ESA, NASA. . .”

“Can’t we get it?”

“I’m afraid that no one is talking at the moment. There is some kind of scare on and congress has just broken a number of international agreements and withdrawn a lot of funding.”

"Then we'll just have to take it from something else."

"Unfortunately, it looks as though all of our accounts are going to be frozen now. The right and the Christian People's Party are asking for a shake up after the news from the U.S."

"So. can we get the money or not?"

"New rules are going to prevent us from doing that."

"Is there nothing we can do?"

"Not really."

He sighs.

"The best I could do would be to cover minor expenses on our general kitty fund. I could give you an advance now for the amount, but then you will have to apply for for a travel reimbursement after that."

"After you have already given me the money?"

"Yes, of course. That's what advance means."

"So why can't I just apply for the reimbursement now? It's already paid for, and she has finished the trip."

"Because you have to fill out the travel form. I can give you an advance until then."

"But the transaction is finished. Completed."

"And when you have travelled, you can claim it back."

"Oh, for crying out loud."

*

A wave of protest rings through the virtual æther of academia, like a World War II air-raid siren. Take cover, the bombs are coming. The tolling of the Reason Bell spells judgement in the works for an intellectual future.

"What is an intellectual anyway?"

The question is posed with the clear resonance of rhetoric. It reverberates in the artificial ambience of the meeting. The words could have been read by a vicar as the opening of a sermon. In truth, they ring with the irony of an assumed loss.

The debate has reached a level of agitation that Jonas has seldom seen in without actual physical presence. A debate was, of course, inevitable; it has not taken long to self-organize.

In a circular theatre of tense participants; they sit, like the members of a war council, academics and scientists from Universities, College and industry. Even the press has come to observe and report on the transcription. They have come to search for meaning, to blow off steam and even to talk of strategies for reversing the perceived damage of the leaked decision. Is it still possible to overturn the judgement?

What is an intellectual anyway? The rhetoric hangs in the virtual air.

"I think it is clear that intellectuals are people who want to influence society with their ideas. They are not just scientists, they are more than that."

"So you are saying that they are more than simply those who have a College education?"

"Of course. Are politicians intellectuals? People in marketing? They influence society with their ideas, but we rarely think of their daily ramblings as intellectual.."

"Politicians and marketers are merely the plumbers and carpenters of influence mechanics. They are not usually the progenitors of the ideas themselves. Not the ideas that change science or even society. They do not conform to a level of importance that warrants the title intellectual."

"But people are arguing that society doesn't need academics. We have burned ourselves on that stove before. We need people we can use. Professionals and craftsmen, not puffed up thinkers."

"What makes you think that there is any contradiction between the need for professionals and the need for thinkers?"

"Well, look at what happened in the information technology bubble. There was enormous demand, but no one to step in. There were plenty of graduates but they were not ready to take on the job. They knew the theory but they didn't know how to get down and dirty. The same with biotech. We did not master these fields quickly because we did not have people who had practical knowledge of the day to day tasks."

"My academic colleague is correct. We do not need thinkers, we need people who can implement existing ideas well. Let other countries innovate and make the mistakes."

"Doesn't our country have a responsibility to innovate, as one of the world's richest countries?"

"Indeed it does. Professionalism," as if spitting, "It is the scourge of academia. It's a goddamned virus."

"I don't think I know what you mean," another says.

"What I mean is that young people used to have a right to an education. Now they only have a right to a *profession*. It's not about ideas and independent thought anymore, it's about training people to behave like good little soldiers."

"Professionalism is filing the sharp edges off society. It is making everyone into silent, uncontroversial trained monkeys. Think no evil, do no evil. It is the opposite of intellectualism."

"I think this may be somewhat overstated. I think some of us do survive. I took on this job, hoping that I could help to reverse that trend."

"I left my teaching post for a sabbatical, hoping to make a difference, but there is no perceived value to intellectualism in the state system. It has been

smeared as something for a slightly unpleasant elite for so long that people have rejected it. All that matters now is the accumulation of wealth.”

“As long as it is no longer about innovation, our task is hopeless. We are just a political can opener.”

“If it is not about innovation, what is it about then?”

“Multiplication. It’s about making more and more of what you already have. Mass consumerism. Thou shalt not create, thou shalt produce and consume, and fill out a tax form at the end of it, but you’ll not get any points for inventing something new, and upsetting the status quo, incurring development costs.”

“No, that’s not true. We can still get money for new projects.”

“Only if we are guaranteed a quick return. Only if we can turn it into a ‘product’ straight away.”

“We have tried to convince the government leadership before, but they have no incentive to listen.”

“They have their own club. The blinkered ruling elite. The system is corrupt. If you do not agree with them, they brand you as a trouble-maker. Democracy has perished in their hands.”

“This is supposed to be the knowledge-based society. It has become the ignorance society – the consumer society. The ministry has seen to that.”

“That’s right. We are not even allowed to teach what we want. We have to teach what the students think they want, or whatever is politically correct. How the hell can they know what they need to know when they don’t know anything?”

“The whole thing started going pear-shaped when they started focusing on this idea of better ‘management’, where management is supposed to mean competitive leadership. But the role of management is not commercial dictatorship, it’s about coordination. Management ought to be a conduit—something that receives and coordinates the autonomous activities of the specialists under its wing. Not under its command! A leader is something else entirely.”

“The people with the purse strings are just ignorant. It’s not their fault.”

“That means that we are just playing a game of made-up rules to get money for the development of society. But we cannot figure out what we’re getting. It’s like pulling the lever on a one-armed bandit in a Casino. Throw the dice and see what comes out.”

“The bureaucrats are burying us. They claim with a straight face that their formalia are there to keep us on the straight and narrow, you know – to help us along. Naturally, the effect is the opposite.”

“It’s not that simple. It’s the child society. No one trusts academics anymore to know what they are doing. So they have to put us in straitjackets, with so many strings attached that we can’t even wriggle. We have to *apply*, in writing, to carry out every little movement, we make no decisions by ourselves. And every application has to have ‘milestones’ and ‘deliverables’ because non-experts want

to feel as though they have some kind of control over what we are going to be doing with our time and what they are going to be out of it. It's absolutely ridiculous."

"If we knew what was going to happen, we wouldn't have to do research. That's the whole point. They have made a mockery of the whole idea."

"Can you imagine what they would say if we demanded the same kind of accountability from the ministry. Which calculator are you going to use to add up your sums? What decisions are you going to make in each week of this year? It's ridiculous!"

"There is no trust anymore. Academia is run like a prison camp."

"I don't disagree, but let's not lose our cool."

"I don't know what I'm doing here anymore."

"If we finally get permission to lift a finger, there are reports to be written for every milestone about what we did. The armour plating is so heavy that the beast does not walk."

"All this management nonsense. Our lives are just filled up now with artificial goals, by the administrators and the committees and the bureaucrats. So many that we don't move forward. We never have time to innovate because we are too busy talking about what we want to do, or should have done."

"Without their bureaucracy, the mystique of the state evaporates."

"It's the red queen scenario. You have to run, ever faster, just to stand still."

"Change society from the bottom up. Make them respect intellectuals again, I say."

"But how long is that going to take?"

"Respect for the engineers. Life has become too easy. All you have to do is push a button and you can have whatever you want. But what are we going to do on the day the mobile network breaks down? The day when the power fails and we can no longer warm up your factory prepared food in your microwave oven? If no one remembers how to repair anything, if no one knows how it all works?"

"Don't joke about it. It's serious. Less and less of tax payers' money is going to do anything other than moving. In computer science, we call it a spin-lock. Busy waiting. Sit there burning calories going nowhere. The nation would be healthier if we spend the time running on a treadmill."

"All right, all right. So what are you suggesting we do about it?"

"Well how about paying attention to our wishes, for a start?"

"We do that surely. . ."

"That's exactly my point. You don't. You say you are going to, you set up all the procedures and formal machinations to take care of the debate, and then you just dump the results in the waste-paper basket."

"It's the virtual enactment of Zeno's paradox. As soon as you think you are close to getting somewhere, the powers that be define the remaining distance to

be twice as far.”

Danger, fire and ash. AIDS, SARS, pandemic flu, malaria, cancer. The world is complex and dangerous. It's hopeless to try to be anything, do anything, change anything. It's the law of Jante. If you want risk, try bungee jumping. Just don't try to make a difference—you are no one amidst forces beyond your control. Lie down and face your fate like a good sheep would.

“It's the intervention of the politics of fear in the brave challenges of the future.”

*

A valve is opened, blowing rude steam in the face of the ministry. When an authority acts without the basic agreement of its subjects, its authority is compromised, and it will hear protest. Aftermath is the time for both reflection and retribution. Both are on their way, Jonas knows.

Roness says: “Are they coming to slap out wrists? What did they expect?”

“It wasn't going to be possible to keep this under wraps for long,” Jonas defends.

“They are practically comparing the ministry to the mafia!”

“Maybe the mafia could start research funding,” Jonas mumbles.

“What?”

He shrugs. “The mafia love all the over-regulation in our society. It gives them new opportunities. Every time the government regulates something to death, they have a new market. Spirits, cigarettes, meat. Now why not research? Desperate scientists on some fund racketeering.”

“Our ministerial overlords seem to have done a deal behind his back to undermine the decision of the working group. All our time has just been wasted. It was just a diversionary tactic – something to keep them busy, while the administration rigged the ballot.”

A woman of perhaps fifty, masculine and ferocious, with glasses that she uses as a weapon, arrives in the wake of the debate. She was born for civil service, Jonas thinks. She was forged in the fires of mount Doom from the genes a hospital matron and a filing cabinet. Her intransigence will be both legendary and immutable. She has come to express her absolute displeasure at the lack of serious cooperation expressed in an unfortunate debate that was originated within these walls.

“Society can not stop innovating,” Jonas stands fast. “It is a slippery slope. It is Lewis Carroll's Red Queen. You have to run to stand still. As soon as you stop trying, you fall behind. Society will lose the skills it needs to maintain its basic infrastructure. What will happen when the power goes out?”

The functionary from the ministry feels no sympathy.

"The political decision has been made."

"Without consultation."

"There was ample opportunity to address the discussion."

"The wool was pulled over our eyes."

"People will fall into line. They have to. It has already been decided."

"Do you have kids?"

She raises her eyebrow.

"Well then, you already know that the worst way to try to make someone do something is to tell them they have to. You cannot order someone to be creative."

"Is that some kind of threat?"

"It is a rational observation. You have no doubt seen the transcripts of the open debate."

"These people will have to abide by the decision. The government has decided that the country needs people working on the environmental, good Christian projects."

Jonas fumes at her.

"Mr. Lindgren, you should not consider funding any work that does not fall under this umbrella for the present. To do so would be contrary to your mandate."

"And what about work could probably have strong environmental spin-offs. What about that investment?"

"If it's not within the next two years, it is no good to us. We have to show the OECD that we are a top class research country."

"What you are saying does not even make sense!"

"May Jesus Christ take you into his heart, Mr. Lindgren. Let's move on."

"Then why not let us be one by leaving research to people who understand it?"

She sighs, something like a frown. "We need results, not people playing cowboys and Indians across the country with the country's taxes."

"Do you have any idea what motivates research?"

"We have been making funds available for some time to stimulate activity in the area."

"Then good luck getting call girls to do research."

"What? Mr. . ."

"You cannot pay people to innovate. It comes from an entirely selfish desire to procreate. We don't just do it for money."

"What do you think you are talking about? This is not a game for little boys, Mr. Lindgren. I thought you were more serious than that."

"Research is precisely a game for little boys and girls," he challenges. "If it isn't, you won't get what you are looking for."

"What I want is world class science. Research. And it's your job to deliver it. Science, Jonas. Not play. Science."

“Please don’t use that word,” he says. “It offends me, coming from your lips.”

*

Later, Jonas is sitting at his desk in the frustrated silence of the aftermath. A priority message from Interpol Research arrives. Secure transmission. Puzzlement and trepidation hover within him; Jonas opens the message.

Have noted your protests against Christian Party budget change. . .blah blah. I work for a global Interpol consortium including FBI, MI5, blah blah blah. This is a matter of international security. I think you have a technology that we could use. I have already cleared you and your group for possible security work. Can fund a certain amount of work that seems related to what you are doing. . .

Jonas reads the message several times and laughs.

A friend?

A new development, or something bubbling forth from the hot spring?

Something for Sara, after all?

Where the hell does this come from?

But this is surely something important.

A meeting should be arranged.

In private.

Sorry Joe, I am going to have to commit a sin.

42

A football stadium converted into a church.

“And everybody said Amen and Amen and Amen. Praise the Lord!”

“Praise the memories of John and George! The Lord spoke to them and made them righteous! And we shall reap their harvest!”

“God is love and he is all powerful! God can restore your marriage! He can give you wisdom to make good decisions. Open your hearts and your pocket books to the Lord.”

“I want y’all to say unto yourselves: this is the day the Lord has made, and I am going to enjoy it!”

"Hallelujah!"

"And I shall send my children to a school of Jesus Christ. And I will reach out to my Muslim neighbours and bring their children from their schools to our schools!"

"Praise Jesus!"

"And you will have no worries. Because God is looking after you. You come here and pray and the Lord will hear your voice. Fall down, Beccy! Feel the presence of the Lord within you!"

Hallelujah!

43

Project funding cancelled. Message from Oslo. Means it could be time to consider a job. Can she really start all over again?

Wrap your head around that, girl.

Should have seen it coming. Could have. Interference from freakin' ring-bearers. What is the world coming to? This was something she really wanted to do.

Of course, there's no denying that she has never been one to stop and think about the way her life is going, or what could happen. She is always more concerned with the day to day. Things usually just work out, more or less the way you want, but today certainty seems less than guaranteed. Let's face it, to go chasing after a stick that someone threw off the end of the world was probably not a plan that will put her in the history books. Now the curtain has come down on that farce and it's back to square one.

Make note for future lives: exercise patience before running into danger.

Duh.

Better not get too down.

She has spent some time convalescing. Out here in the country one can do all kinds of cheesy things at the hotels: a jacuzzi with blue and pink disco lighting, surrounded by country and western memorabilia, and Nashville nonsense, organized line dancing in the evenings. Not exactly her idea of fun.

She has been outside, but not far. The fragrances of mountain grasses are entirely gone now, frozen away by the sudden cold. Late summers and sudden winters: they seem to advance every year. The mountain is white again and the world is light years away.

Time to look after me, she thinks.

“Bea, girl.”

“Hey you, still alive?”

“Getting there. Whatchu doing?”

“Just got home from work. Shower time. You?”

“Stuck. Need some cozin’ and some luvvin’.”

“Hey, Genius. Don’t give up. Coming home soon?”

“Hope so.”

“When?”

“ASAP, Cool Thing.”

Fever has finally drained from her and she feels strong. The chance to rest has actually been welcome. Old Donald Duck comics (paper), movies and news on the TV. And Bea. The girl might not have had more than an average schooling, but she is a Professor when it comes to making her feel better.

She hasn’t felt like a prisoner, precisely, more like a raptor in a tar pit. She lost them, the French team. She failed to get what she wanted. She fell behind. Her *raison d’être* evaporated. She ought to pick herself up and move on. Find a new one.

*

At two o’clock in the afternoon, her premonition is realized. The leather beat-bitch tramps her chequered garb into the mountain hotel’s lounge and regards her with that absent bitchiness she is so good at.

Her cardboard-on-toast voice tolls: “It’s over.”

Sara Stensrud glances up at her from the tablet in her lap.

“Call you later, mum,” she says, completing a different conversation, and meets her unassailable nonchalance. “What’s over?”

Steroid Sally stands in poise, as a rock would poise, in the entrance to the lounge, with face-lift pony-tail sucking her backwards, and cold blue eyes avoiding those of the only person in the room. “They have surrendered. All of them. The army is rounding them up now.”

“The football gangs?”

She nods, chewing some kind of gum, as if masticating flavoured plastic can blow smoke in Vibe’s face. Looking anywhere, everywhere but at her.

“And their friends. Out of their depth in this weather.”

“Does that mean we can get out of here now?”

"We're getting rid of you."

Likewise, bitch.

"District will be up to clear you later. Be good, and say nice things, or you might end up with a fine."

She backs out of the entrance, turns and leaves.

District will clear her later? Like she were under arrest or something? In your dreams, Sally. She can think of no good reason to stay here any longer than necessary. She's just afraid I might say something about her hobby. . .

Say nice things. . .

In other words: I know you saw me distributing illegal spirits, and you'd better not say a word, or I'll have you.

*

The news from Saskwatch Sally is a turning point.

What can she do here now that her project has been pulled out from underneath her? Dr Lindgren says he will sort something out, but what the hell is that supposed to mean? Since when did he ever come up trumps?

Call comes in. Luck of the devil.

"Sara Vibeke Stensrud?"

"Ehh. . .yes. Sort of, anyway."

"My name is Edward Bishop. I work for Interpol's research centre. I spoke briefly with Dr Jonas Lindgren and I would like to talk to you about doing a job for me, perhaps permanently."

She checks her message board.

TARGETED: INTERNSHIP WITH RESEARCH OPPORTUNITIES, APPLICATION OF BIOLOGICAL AND ECONOMIC MODELS TO CIVIC ORDER AND CONTROL. CONTACT QUERY RETURN. HELP NEEDED IMMEDIATELY.

More details are in some other attachments..

"Just wanted to speak to you directly. Look at this, then we can talk in a little while."

"Thanks, I'll look at it."

She stares out of the window at the rock just beyond it one last time. It seems to symbolize her predicament. From the inside of the hotel, the rock looks harmless and scenic, biding its time: just a painting on the canvas of the daylight. But, if she goes outside, it is rough and hard and sharp and cold. It is dangerous. It cuts.

How much we sacrifice of reality, she thinks. Pain is truth, if anything is. This rock. This cage. It is time to be leaving. Time to reclaim the world of pain and future.

Could have sworn she saw Ethanol Emma talking to the man at the hotel desk. Probably selling her moonshine. He is an old cardiganed shrew with a bulbous red nose that tells her he is more of a country alcoboy than mountain guide. She goes out there.

"Did you see what happened to that police woman?"

"Who?"

"You know, tall weight lifter. I don't know her name. She was right here."

"She has probably gone."

"Ah."

"So you heard the news?" the balding receptionist asks.

"Yes. We're not quarantined anymore."

"That means the busses will be running again from tomorrow morning."

"Does that mean there will be a bus soon to Oslo?"

"Just got word from the Express. First one is due in tomorrow at six in the morning."

"Nothing sooner? I'm in kind of a hurry. Now that we're all free."

"Eh, no. Not unless you want to sit with me to the town. I'm going down the mountain later. I can't wait for some supplies. You could get a train from the station."

"Really?"

"It's not a limousine, but it'll roll down the hill."

"Yes, yes, yes! Thank you!"

"All right then," he chuckles. "Be ready in an hour. . ."

"Check me out!"

Not like that, Grampa!

*

She packs her rucksack quickly, stuffing everything in as quickly as possible. No sense in being tidy now. With luck she will be home before long where real clothes await and she no longer has to live in tent fabrics. She is not certain how the local police will react to her simply leaving, but cross that one when we get there.

She can imagine the incendiary glare of Suicide Sally threatening to melt her own icy demeanour. There must be a volcano beneath that ice. A real mud pool. Give yourself a facial.

The little box she received from the American has been waiting on her dressing table, like the mysterious visitor from 2001: A Space Odyssey, ever since

she received it. She packs it into her backpack. She has been staring at it for minutes on end, without being able to penetrate its secret. A note is attached to the box. "Sara—don't try to open this until December 12th," it says. It seems to be locked, so there must be some reason for the message. She placed it next to her mirror and tried everything barring telepathy to reveal its mystery. Perhaps they simply wanted her to have a Christmas present. Maybe it doesn't matter now.

New message from mystery sponsor.

REPLY: THANKS FOR RESPONSE. DO YOU HAVE
A KNOWLEDGE OF THE THEORY OF ECONOMIC
INFLUENCE? PROGRAMMING?

REPLY: YES. HALF WAY THROUGH A PHD ON
AUTONOMOUS AGENT INTERACTIONS. SHOULD
BE A DAB HAND.

So who is this person? Some kind of introduction might be on the fair side of polite.

REPLY: INTERESTED. CAN YOU MEET ME IN OSLO?

REPLY: OKAY. CAN MEET YOU ON ARRIVAL IN
OSLO IN A DAY OR SO. CURRENTLY IN JOTUN-
HEIMEN.

REPLY: WILL CALL YOU ON TABLET IN 10 MINS.

She waits for the call, sitting cross legged on her bed, holding a tablet. Incoming. She opens.

"Hello."

An older man.

"Hello, Sara. Thank you for responding. I have need for your skills in several ways. I have a police operation to conduct. It has to do with the gang violence and the rise of radical groups. I can't tell you the details until you come and sign non-disclosure agreements. This is confidential police business."

"So you are police?"

"I am interpol, Norwegian branch."

"I have been working on a collaborative project which now seems to have been halted."

"I heard. The expansion of Chri. . . certain influences in the United States has resulted in a sudden change of budget. Space and BioTech in particular have been axed in favour of so-called 'Moral Research'. Enormous pressure has been levied on their international partners to withdraw from the projects."

"Are we supposed to live in the dark ages now?"

"I suppose so. Sara, would you be interested in coming to work for me?"

"What would I do?"

"Close to what you have already been doing. Working in a team. I can guarantee that the work will be at least as interesting and challenging as you have been doing. Now you get to work with humans and machines."

"We should talk when I get home. I've been a bit out of it. Sick."

*

They are driving along the winter road. Her escape chute. The snowplough has wiped and stacked the landscape, giving them tunnel vision. She is a mole burrowing through a trough of feta cheese.

"Looking forward to going home to your folks?" the hotelier asks.

"Yes!" she agrees.

"They should be glad to see you after this trouble."

Ah, the trouble.

He is right. It will be good to get home, but her decision to leave quietly could backfire: her immunity to others' instructions has always served as a provocation to them, as her brother with attest. Always she has faith that nothing bad will happen. She has duck feathers, as well as the beak. Trouble runs off her, to her brother's annoyance. She knows how to use her looks to activate forgiveness when necessary.

It is dark by the time they reach the small town station. She thanks the hotelier and steps out of the warm cocoon into a biting chill. They have timed the journey so that she will not have to wait more than a few minutes for the train to arrive, so she shouldn't have to freeze her nipples off for too long.

She pulls out her backpack from the rear seat and waves a good bye. The car moves off and then stops a little way down the road, but he doesn't get out, so she turns to find the platform.

Moonlight lights up the mountains behind her. Pretty, but it's time to say her good-byes. The road she has arrived on stretches back up the valley, snaking its way up the mountain; on it, a blue light, far off, reaches out to her across the darkened pass, as if pointing across the mountain with the long, icy finger of the law.

Her heart skips a beat. A police car this way comes.

Beat Bitch Sally? Who else could it be? Frank, coming to say good-bye?

She turns to see what became of the hotelier and sees that he has received a call, which he takes on an old hand-held receiver. He looks about as if searching for her and she knows then that the call is about her. Damn. It was an even bet, but she is not sticking around to be talked to or stopped.

Vibe turns and walks away from the vehicle towards the small station building. There are not many places to hide here precisely, but she can lie low.

This is not a time to allow herself to feel guilt for leaving. If she just keeps moving around, they should never have to meet. Anyway, as long as she is near civilization, they know where she is by her mobile. It's not like she could hide. The blue light is edging closer. It will arrive before the train comes.

She checks the time. Just a few minutes until the train arrives. Browse some magazines, buy a book? There is a platform barrier here, she sees. The best place for her to be is on the other side of that barrier.

She heaves her backpack onto her frame one more time and heads for the gate.

"Where do you think you are going?"

She flashes her mobile strap. "I have a pass for the train."

"Not with that, you don't," he says, pointing at her backpack.

"But. . .what?"

"Train is extremely full this evening and there is no room in the cabin. You'll have to check that in as freight. Over there. Better hurry."

He points her in the direction of the baggage office.

Registered freight and luggage. Special baggage. Post. Post?

She goes to the postal desk on a sudden whim.

"Eh hello. I'm in a bit of a hurry. Can I send this to my address in Oslo?"

"You can, if you can pay for it," he laughs.

"When would it arrive?"

"That depends where you live."

"Oslo. Centre."

He consults a list, as if he doesn't know the answer. "Probably tomorrow afternoon. You would have to be there to receive it, or collect it from the depot."

"Okay. How much?"

She has some money from her mum now. She can afford this. It will even make the journey more pleasant. She has to suppress a hopping up and down motion.

"Scales," the clerk barks.

She rests the pack on the scales.

"It's already tagged," she says.

Train now arriving for Oslo Central Station on platform 2.

Damn, she thinks. This is cutting it a bit fine.

He scans the pack and extracts her details, taking a little longer than she feels is necessary under the circumstances.

"All right. This looks okay. You can send second class and save a little, but I don't recommend it."

"No. That won't be necessary. Just get it to me as quickly as you can!" She grins, giving him the school girl look.

"Ooookaaaayy. Here's a copy of an agreement. Read the top part. Sign to accept." He indicates for her to download it from the counter, working at a clockwork speed, with no indication of knowing the meaning or urgency.

She looks over the form. "All right. Everything seems to be in order."

Train on platform 2 leaves immediately for Oslo Central Station. Passengers are advised that there will be no waiting.

Through the window she can see the police car park outside. She sees Saskwatch step out of the car and start towards the station.

"Eh—so can I just leave this with you?"

"Anything dangerous in here? You checked the box?"

"Yes, yes."

"In a hurry are we?"

That's what I said!

"Actually yes," she smiles sweetly, remembering her demeanour. "I have to catch this train, and it's supposed to be very full."

"I see. Well, it looks as though everything is in order."

"So I'll get this tomorrow?" she asks, redundantly, but hoping for a dismissal.

"That's what the man said."

"Great service. Thanks."

Train now leaving for Oslo Central Station on platform 2.

No time!

"You'd better go," he says calmly, "if you want to catch that".

She exhales. "Thanks!"

She turns to leave and her eye catches that of the policewoman, through the window, glaring at her. She has been spotted. Saskwatch turns towards the door from the exit side of the building.

Vibe's heart skips another beat, but she forces herself to pretend that she has not seen her. Without much encouragement, she walks quickly to the back-door leading towards the platform and trots towards to the platform barrier, breaking into a run as she goes. The conductor-barrier registers her ticket and the human waves her through.

She runs for the train.

Doors close.

Whistle blows.

Behind her, no one is following.

She plops herself down into her designated seat and allows herself to calm her beating heart.

I am going home.

She is looking forward to the prospect of being back in the city, where time runs at the proper rate.

44

Silver eel, electric and hushed. It carries Vibe from the pods of rocky leviathans, in the high ground, into the lower pastures of the capitol. Back towards to Oslo's basin of attraction. A journey of several hours. Time for sleep.

Urban re-entry deep-fries her in a sensory feed. Sizzling data streams boil her. She is fish'n'chips. She is Burger'n'fries. This is the 24-hour Deli. Yet it contains the life support, the basic feeds to buoy 21st Century incompetent life. It has proper clothes, the trappings of ceremony, and warm bodies for tactile relief.

Hello immersion tank, my silver lining.

The train deposits her rested and more lightweight soma at Oslo's central station with just enough possessions to find her way home. It feels good to have the city coursing through her senses once again. Mountains are necessary and beautiful, but above all they refine one's appreciation of the city.

It is about 20:40 hours when she arrives in Oslo. She tightens the straps on her mobile to better absorb the subtle notifications from the smart environment. The canopy of the city is both dark and light at the same time.

There has been a light rain in the capital and the air is cool but fresh. Compared to the mountains, it seems damp and almost warm here.

Vibe takes a town-bike from the stall and cycles the half kilometre or so to her small two-room flat. She is itching to shower and change into something more like clothes. Something befitting a girl.

I used to be that, she thinks.

It is quiet and dusty in the flat. No air has circulated here for over a week. The level in the toilet is low, where the water has evaporated. She has bought fresh milk from the corner Deli for making tea.

After a purging shower and hair cure, she puts her mobile pieces in to be washed, and switches to her house combo.

As she does so, a message comes in for her:

POST OFFICE TELEGRAM: YOUR BAGGAGE,
LABELLED UNDER PACKAGE CONTRACT 17045 HAS
BEEN INTERCEDED BY ORDER OF LOCAL POLICE
AND CANNOT THEREFORE BE DELIVERED AS PER
CONTRACT. NO FUNDS WILL BE CHARGED TO
YOUR ACCOUNT AND THE SAID CONTRACT IS THERE-
FORE VOID. PLEASE RETAIN THE ATTACHED RE-
CEIPT FOR THIS ITEM, WHICH IS NOW IN POLICE
CUSTODY.

She stares in horror at the message, her mouth wide open.

She sits down.

The bitch!

Then again.

The bitch!

Now she has gone out on a limb.

If she has used police privilege against her, she'd better have a pretty good explanation.

What the hell have I done to deserve this?

She summons calm. There was nothing she urgently needed in the pack. Her tablet and a few clothes, mostly, and gear she doesn't need here. But that is hardly the point.

What the hell are you afraid of, you stupid freaking bitch?

She sits for a long time with a frown that is half way towards wanting to cry. Too much stress lately. Too much.

She needs to feel calm and complete. She needs her shiny confidence back. Sleep will help, but she is the opposite of tired at this moment.

Consideration calls forth the spirits of healing.

I know what to do, she thinks. This doesn't matter. It can be sorted tomorrow or even the day after. There are ways to deal with it.

She considers calling her mum, but that will just make her want to complain and even cry about it. Not going to happen.

She stabs at her combo and pulls up her buddy list. Neighbours are useful sometimes. Geography isn't dead yet. Paul, where are you? Just back from a trip. You busy?

She invites her chum over and strips him. She needs to feel the heat of someone between her legs. He obliges her, as any half-sane male would. Afterwards, she sends him on his way and settles into her cocoon, feeling empowered.

Text to Bea.

“Back in black, babe. Just male-nutritished. Wanna come and sleep over?”

*

“Dr Jonas Lindgren. My name is Edward Bishop. I work with Interpol. I have a project where I need some urgent consulting. Would you be willing to help me?”

Bishop follows Jonas as he walks through the sterile lobby of the research council offices, in the centre of town. He has been waiting there for a few minutes and was told that Jonas would come out from a meeting in a short time. The secretary pointed a telling biro at him as he appeared.

Reporters have gathered outside the Research Council: headline hunters and interview hounds. A crowd of them is accreting.

Jonas looks wary and tired, but not unresponsive. “Help? What kind of help did you have in mind?”

“I left a message for you. It has to do with your work on autonomous agents and influence networks.”

Jonas stops and regards the older man.

“That was you,” he says thoughtfully.

“That was me.”

“I mentioned to you my student. Well, ex student, as it turns out. Did you try her?”

Bishop nods. “Yes, I am in touch with her. In fact, I have an appointment to meet her here.”

As the words come out, a slim beauty in dark, booted jeans with a broad leather belt and a short white winter-jacket appears through the main entrance, swishing her hair to one side. She sees Jonas and strides up to the two men.

“Hello,” she says. “What the hell is going on out there?” Then: “Remember me?”

She seems a little thinner and a little tougher than the last time he saw her, but he responds with an air of pleasant surprise, for someone obviously a little stressed out.

“Sara, speak of the devil.”

“And angels appear!” she chastizes with smiling eyes.

“I am Ed Bishop,” Ed Bishop adds.

“Ah hei, nice to meet you. So you two know each other?”

“Ah no, no we don’t. Not yet. But now that we are all here, I would very much like to talk to you both. This is a matter of some importance and I know that it is going to interest you.”

Jonas looks around, as if wondering where they should go. His office? The receptionist is waving to him.

“Jonas, Kaja is here. . .” she whispers.

She points out of the entrance at a figure in a long coat, paused at the foot of the steps with a small child.

“Damn,” he says.

It never rains, but it pours.

He casts a worried look at his visitors. “I can’t see her now.” Then to the receptionist: “Tell her I had to go out would you?” He looks panicked. “Please, both of you, come this way.”

He practically pushes them along a corridor, leading to a separate but connected part of the building.

“Come on, this way. I don’t want to run into her on the way out.”

Vibe and Bishop regard one another quizzically.

*

As he shuffles them out, Sara says. “Don’t suppose you’ve you talked to the embassy? Have you heard from the team?”

He shakes his head. “Sorry.”

“I think I want to kill someone.”

He grunts. “Governments are shutting the door on everyone’s future, not just yours.”

“Aren’t there laws protecting against this kind of thing?”

“Glad you asked,” he winces without further embellishment.

He leads them into something of a blind alley within the building; the only way forward is an emergency exit.

“I’m really sorry for this,” Jonas says. “I have some personal matters that are taking up my time. We won’t have any peace if she finds us, and we can’t go out front because of the reporters. Let’s go out and try to find a coffee shop.”

They seem agreed. Jonas pushes the fire exit bar and they slip out into bright, grey daylight.

It one of those damp days when sounds travels more efficiently than usual, when cars make more noise and passing aircraft seem almost to be upon you. Crackling winter tires break up the air making it hard to talk. Not far away from them, there is an unholy sound of roaring people flocking, from the old Blitz house.

“What’s going on there?” Jonas asks.

"Youth activists, I think," Bishop says. "They have organized a some kind of demonstration. I think it's some commemoration—or commiseration of the old Blitz house."

"Looked like there were Nazi hecklers throwing things at them when I passed there a moment ago."

She sees that Jonas looks a little freaked.

"We shouldn't go that way."

"They're just people," Vibe says. "A bit too loud, but they're probably harmless."

He shudders.

"I suppose I'm getting too old for this kind of thing."

"People with a cause to unite them," Bishop mutters. "A mob."

"Yesterday it was Christian Rights on the stands on Karl Johan. Old people complaining about young people. Plus ça change, eh? Maybe I'm turning into one of them."

"Was there violence?"

"No, no. Well, not physical, though I'm not convinced their message is any better than a thump in the face. Small town politics, but there is big money behind it all. They're probably more dangerous than a few louts. They have ties to established institutions. They take each other more seriously."

"I heard some gang was coming to get *us*," Vibe says to Jonas.

Bishop nods. "Tried to get your advisor here. Come on, let's go back up this way. We can walk through to St Hanshaugen. It shouldn't be too slippery." He starts off up the road that snakes up the hill, passing by blocks of flats built along the curvilinear road. There are plenty of cars parked on each side to conceal them from watching eyes, and they can cut in to the many pedestrianized side streets.

Vibe looks at Jonas, intensely. "Really?"

He nods. "Really. They never got as far as you. You went away at the right time, but they probably would have."

"Right now their cronies are busy with a protest rally. You'll be okay for now."

"So, Mr. Bishop, what is it you do exactly? You still haven't told me."

"Nor me," Vibe adds.

"Yes. This is where it gets difficult to explain. I have an interesting job," he procrastinates, slowing his stroll to face them. "Basically you could say that I am employed to apply the science of control and maintenance to policing our society. I work for the police force. Interpol."

"Coppers aren't just running around hitting people over the heads with their truncheons anymore, eh?"

"Well, there is still a bit of that too, I'm sure."

“Does it pay well? Career prospects?”

He laughs at Vibe’s odd question. “Not really. International policing has to make its own money these days. We invest in businesses and currencies and run things like a charity—donations from interested Samaritans, and so on. You can’t fight corruption in governments if you are on their payroll. So funds are limited. I get a comfortable amount.”

“So you don’t work for the Norwegian police?”

“We are part of the international branch, but we are formally part of Norwegian police force, yes.”

“And you say you need our help?”

He smiles. “Yes. Two different reasons, as it happens. Finding people with a science education isn’t all that easy these days. Recruiting people to work for something other than money is just as hard. You both have expertise that overlaps with our own.” To Sara, “You have been doing some very interesting things in the VR. Perhaps you have some friends too. I am not sure about that, but I know at least that you are involved.”

Her eyes widen and she laughs nervously. “What things? What makes you think it is me?”

“Well, mainly because it is my job to know.” He winks.

Vibe smiles sweetly.

“The bottom line is this,” he says. “Law and order, the world over, is going down the tubes, largely due to the fact that people no longer see the need to rely on one another as citizens. That makes it hard for the police forces of the world to function properly.”

“Uh, here it comes.” Vibe gives him a look.

“Police forces are struggling against the odds. Something has to be done to preserve their potency. After the big cuts in resources, in the last decade, police are no longer really equipped to deal with the rising criminal gang culture. When vigilante groups start to spring up, then you know the you are in serious trouble.”

“Where’s Batman when you need him?”

Jonas is following the conversation, but his head is scanning around to see who might be following them.

“We are trying to preserve that potency, partly with the help of governments and partly in spite of them.”

“Are you talking about the game business?” Jonas asks. “It was in the news a while back. About the American government spreading its message of peace and capitalism?”

Bishop regards him. “That’s part of it,” he agrees. “But it’s much more complicated than that. The whole thing is a battleground and our research has shown that the messages they are trying to convey are complex and intermingled. I’d have to explain some of the background. . .”

"Please, go ahead. I'm interested. You know I had no idea that the police did research."

Vibe nods. "Does this have to do with the job you mentioned?"

Bishop nods. "All right. Let's see where do we begin?" He points up a side road. "Let's go up here." The road is quieter and it is easier to hear him speak. "So, let's say there are several theories about how to keep society in order. There is the expression of rules in law, but how to enforce? We can start with rule by *fear*. Fear of reprisal, whether it be incarceration or punishment, fines, torture in a dictatorship, or the threat of what might happen if people do not behave by law. . ."

"Happy thoughts. Okay, so we have done fear."

"Then there is the dogma of good habits. Prevention."

"If everyone is good, then everyone else sees them being good and wants to join in, and so the whole world is just hunky dory?"

"Exactly."

"What else?"

"Well, now we have to decide if we have democratic law or edict from an authority, like a church."

"Which you are going to tell us is an oxymoron, because no one can agree on what is right and wrong." Vibe kicks herself internally for involuntary huffiness.

Grow up, girl. Just relax.

She finds herself wishing that she were sitting somewhere working on her thesis, programming or doing something where she did not feel out of place.

"No, no one ever agrees. The point is not that everyone in a democracy has to agree. A sufficient majority has to agree, but what's more important then is that the remainder of society has to accept defeat. They have to sacrifice their ideals for the sake of the whole system. It is a trade off and the result does not necessarily have to be benign. It just has to be agreed."

"So that's the catch?"

"The catch is that people do not accept defeat anymore, because they can pretty much do as they please. We all have the tools and the means to do essentially as we like today. That makes it very difficult to maintain the traditional institutions of government. It makes it hard to police rules that are openly considered irrelevant by a population without a sense of civic duty."

Jonas is nodding. "Money pulls the strings these days," he says. "It has nothing to do with democracy. You just need money. The only voting democracy we have is in kids' mobile polls and pop contests."

"Some people have said that the real threat is global capitalism. That is the West's form of terrorism. It's not terrorism, of course, but it is a kind of a virus against democracy, in the real sense."

“Apes used to groom one another and that is how a clan was bound. Now we exchange money. It’s just virtual grooming. Little gluons that bind society together.”

Jonas seems to be enjoying this peculiarly abstract discussion. Vibe thinks it is all just a bit odd, here in the middle of town.

Hello! I’m here. . .

“Nature abhors democracy,” Bishop adds. “It is inefficient — except in very special conditions.”

“So I don’t get it. Where is this going?” Vibe says, silencing incoming on her mobile. “Where do we come into this?”

“You know about controlling the behaviour of autonomous agents.”

“Robots, maybe. . . Come on, let’s go up here.”

Jonas leads them into an avenue that rises even more steeply through the residential functionalism, towards some shops.

Bishop stops for a moment, panting at the exertion of walking up the steep incline.

“There are basic principles . . . involved . . . that can be transferred. And besides. . . we are also using robots: virtual robots . . . in game playing.”

“What for?”

He takes several breaths. “For encouraging people . . . to obey the law, . . . and have a sense . . . of civic duty.”

“People can be bought or manipulated.”

“Yes, they can. We can. Or you can brainwash them.”

“*Brainwash them?*” Vibe’s exclamation seems to be suggesting that they have lost their marbles completely.

“If you can make everyone agree by brain-washing them from an early enough age, how can you say that it is wrong? How do you know that you are not already brainwashed? Maybe its a good thing. You have agreement, after all. And it’s a legal game move in the democratic process.”

“But that’s manipulation.”

He nods. “Sure. Point to a country or society where this has not happened. What society does not preach some form of moral righteousness? Do you mind if we stop here a moment?”

She shrugs.

Jonas adds: “Politics used to assume individual maturity and deal with objective issues of society’s development and the governance of popular intellect. Now it is full steam ahead in talking directly to people’s emotional brains, manipulating their subjective beliefs and views of the world. It’s telling us how to think and feel.”

“And that mollicoddling is needed precisely because we are all getting more selfish.”

“You address individual subjectivity because people are no longer a uniform ideal gas. It has to be personal, or they don’t care.”

They pause to catch their breath. Sara texts a message to someone furiously and refocuses. She is not fully certain that she understands what she is doing here. Jonas does not seem disturbed or surprised by the conversation, rather he seems distant, as if thinking about something else.

“So,” Bishop concludes, as if turning a page, after his moment. “All of this brings us to the virtual reality games. They have become the new battleground for indoctrination. It’s about the competition of doctrines in a group: who is most efficient at tapping into people’s instincts and needs.”

“The survival of the fittest doctrine?”

“Partly. Well. There are many degrees of freedom here. Money plays a role too—social currency. I shouldn’t get these things muddled.”

“The survival of the richest.”

“For an idea or a doctrine to take hold, it just has to be robust and sustainable amongst the forces and processes that move society. It does not have to be right or wrong, it only needs to have support in the processes of the day. That is why we are able to pass laws about all kinds of things that seem immoral.”

Jonas nods. “Like patenting genes. Drug companies have the power, using the money they command, to distort the balance of opinion in their favour by paying for huge indoctrination campaigns.”

“This has become par for the course,” Bishop agrees. “There is no one who is not using these techniques today. Not even us.”

Bishop talks directly to Vibe. “I have been looking you up. Do you know how rare it is to find someone with an education like yours? Someone close by who has actually studied similar problems? You could be invaluable to us, with your knowledge of the techniques. Imagine applying your knowledge to social engineering instead of robotics.”

Sara is not sure whether she feels a little taller, because he clearly respects her, or a little freaked out, because he is a weirdo who has her in his sights.

“I’m . . . flattened,” she says.

They continue on up the hill to the small shopping street, and pause at the crossroads. With busses thundering past, the conversation falls to Jonas and Bishop. Cannot really hear what they are saying. She is left to mull over the idea of working with a megalomaniac with a social justice complex, or signing on to social security and considering prostitution as a career.

She feels like a fraud. How could she, of all the unlikely souls, possible do this job—whatever it is he is even asking her to do. It seems totally weird and more than a little immoral. After everything that has happened to her in the past couple of weeks, there must be some simpler option than this?

"Let's go in here," Jonas says, pointing to a coffee shop with plenty of room. "I'm going to have to leave pretty soon, I fear. but you should keep on talking."

They sit around a table and can look one another in the eyes for the first time. The sounds of the road fades into the background.

"The more you look at society," Bishop rants, "the more you realize that it is not what you think it is."

"Of course," Jonas agrees, understanding his point, or at least believing that he does.

"We play these elaborate charades that we make up to pretend we are satisfied. They confirm our visions of what is good and right. You remember as a child how you used to make believe? You pretend to play out scenarios? Well you don't stop as an adult. You just think you do."

What am I doing here?

"All right. So civilization is a deception according to you?" Sara drones, in a funk. "We have society, politics, commerce. Isn't that civilization?" She recalls the game of civilization and its basic milestones.

"Well, it sort of works, so it is not a deception. But only in terms of deeds."

"Hello?"

He smiles vaguely, pursing his lips. "Everyone has their own delusions and it is not just some conspiracy, as some people think. They really believe in these delusions. That is the point. We are all out there, trying to control the world, but the world is really controlling us to a far greater extent and we just fantasize our involvement in it. But then you must have seen all of this in your field? I mean, all of these emergent phenomena in biology are cases in point."

"Is it worth saving?" Jonas sighs.

Vibe cuts in with some searing logic that raises their eyebrows. "If you are a purist, and society cannot be protected by legitimate, authorized means, then you can make the argument that it does not deserve to exist. It is doomed to failure. Stability will surely be lost to competing opportunism."

Bishop laughs in appreciation. "Yes!"

"It wobbles."

"It rocks and capsizes! So you need a police force to balance the boat. Mobsters have become sophisticated now. They are providing all kinds of signals of their own. Business and religion are in there too, if you care to distinguish them."

"And for the good news?"

"The good news is that all of the money that we were forced into spending on anti-terrorism measures, to appease the United States, in the early years of this century, is now proving to be a good investment for helping us with the gangs."

"Computer tools?"

"Information is power. Even the simplest-minded form of gang has a structure that is based on relationships and interactions. It is all networking. The

tools we have developed to study networks have allowed us to see connections and important clues that we might never have understood. You have a network model, tied to a database and then you perform correlations. And then there is the VR.”

“Gaming technology?”

“Exactly. They have mastered quite different skills: they don’t analyze the present, they create the present in incredible detail.”

“And people think they can use it to control us?”

“We are more gullible than ever before,” Bishop says seriously. “It’s no joke.”

Sara nods. “I can go along with that. . .”

“You might think it sounds like a bad conspiracy theory, but it is just the day to day mechanics of marketing, essentially. And it is getting easier. People are not as critical of what they hear as they used to be. Take the example of you two. The mob, or some vigilante group, whatever, you see, misunderstood something about your work. They found a title on the web.”

“My old thesis?”

“Yes - it has all the right words for an uneducated mind to attract attention. We believe that they are looking for you because they are trying to master these techniques for themselves. Lucky for us, people don’t understand much of what they read anymore. We have already apprehended two men who were sent to possibly kidnap you.”

“And who is it you want to influence, Mr. Bishop?” Jonas asks, entirely dispassionately.

“Everyone. I want to make sure that there is a fair fight in the information, so that no one can usurp our lives. Some people think that means you have to leave things alone. But they forget that every living system needs maintenance to keep it looking good.”

A low buzz emanates from Jonas’s wrist. “Excuse me,” he says. He gets up and walks away to speak in private.

Bishop mutters on philosophically. “To have a working society, you need to have a whole chain of self-fortifying things in place. It’s so fragile.”

Vibe watches Jonas, looking somewhat agitated and feels a little sorry for him. Something is going on today for him. Perhaps his life is not as cushy as she has assumed.

“So you think it’s all breaking up?”

“Look around! Who has respect for the law? If people don’t basically agree with the justness of a law, they will not enforce it themselves, and then the police can’t do anything but erode their own authority by trying to enforce it.”

“We take more liberties than before? We’re more liberal. Is that the same thing?”

“We have to respect the idea of abstaining from certain behaviours for the good of others. We have to obey the laws we create. We must respect the people who make and enforce the law, and they also have to respect it themselves. Even that isn’t easy. We have a huge problem in some areas with police thinking that they are above the rest of society and that the law basically does not apply to them – they can park their cars in a no-stopping street. That only leads to other people imitating their lawlessness and turning tiny transgressions into large ones.”

She nods. “I could tell you a story about rural policing.”

“All of this is failing, Sara. Our work is about fighting that reversal by reminding people of the values that society is based on. It is a new kind of meta-policing if you like.”

Jonas interrupts.

“Look, I apologise, but I’m going to have to go back. Maybe you can keep me informed. It sounds as though Sara can help you with what you need. And I am happy to support this. This is very interesting.”

*

The café is quiet at this time of day. Oil paintings, dark and brooding, fill the walls of room, between its large windows; the imagery is somewhere between fascinating and disturbing.

“Who’s the artist?” she asks.

“Oh.” He laughs absently. “I’m not sure.”

“These are good. A bit creepy.”

“Can I get you something warm to drink?”

“Cocoa,” she says.

He goes to the counter and comes back some moments later.

“So, how was your trip to Jotunheimen. Was it holiday?”

She makes an involuntary snort and shakes her head as she sticks her nose into the cream on top of the cocoa.

“It was field work for my thesis. But then my project was cancelled by a bunch of . . . by the changes in priorities.” She makes inverted commas with her fingers. “So I find myself up shit creek without a paddle, pardon my French.”

“Well, I can help you with a job, if I can persuade you.”

“I suppose it’s better than the alternatives for now.”

Bishop studies her. “You are young,” he observes. “I have a group working on this. They’re young too, and I want you to meet them. We are an odd bunch of students and lost academics, combined with programmers working in the gaming industry and computer engineers with special skills. I would like to have your help. You could bridge a communication gap for me, and if you like it, I would like to keep you.”

Vibe smiles.

“So how do you get to do all of this stuff? Why doesn’t someone stop you?”

“Our main cover is peoples’ lack of interest in law enforcement as an institution. The only time they really think about us is when we are interfering in their personal wishes.”

“I don’t know too many people with a respect for the police.”

“It’s a global phenomenon.”

“But you have to keep slugging away at it? I guess we’d all be pretty effed off if the police didn’t do their job.”

He smiles appreciatively. “The maintenance theorem says that we cannot really control anything. At best we can fool ourselves by keeping a system in a rough balance over time. But we are never precisely in control. We only moderate the balance of change so that it never strays too far from what we want.” He pauses to take a sip of his cocoa. “This game that people are playing in the VR. It is designed to do the same. It is huge. It needs to be self-maintaining because it would cost far too much to run it hands on. There are many automatic systems that tweak it.”

“What’s your approach?”

“The purpose of the game is to serve the needs of the world’s largest trans-global companies. They are now suffering from the very lack of law and order that their own ideas have resulted in. There are many ways in which it does that. It is designed to brainwash people with Western values, to keep them interested in warfare and aggression, in case America needs to go to war. It’s designed to make people respect the authority of government. It is designed in a framework that makes all of this manipulation quite possible.”

“Captive audience.”

“Our approach is to deflect other peoples’ bad messages and to support our own message of obeying the law and thinking about your neighbour.”

“Sounds hard.”

“It is, and we have not been very good at it, but now we have a secret weapon, so to speak. Two, if we count you.”

“Me?”

“Yes,” he chuckles. “I’m sorry to be the one to break the bad news, but you have fallen into a flytrap. A honey pot. We have been watching your escapades on the game for some time, learning from you.”

“Ehhh.” She laughs without humour. “You mean the back-door my friend showed me?”

“You wish. It’s one of the ways that we benefit from the technology built in by the government for modelling. What you have been doing in our honeypot is to introduce a very powerful form of countermeasure. It looks like noise, but you are just one person and you cannot possibly generate the amount of

information needed to be noise. But you have found some kind of pattern that is even more effective than noise at causing mixing, convection in the system. Instead of allowing it to fall into its preferred configuration, your activities have been preventing that from happening.”

“My friend and I like to have a little fun with the palm heads.”

“Palm heads?”

“Gamers whose salutes are stuck on to their foreheads.”

Bishop laughs.

“You have them dancing to your merry tune.”

Like the pied piper. . .

“I suppose it’s something I learned from the VeiVeks. If you keep on applying random strong signals to a diverse mass, you will just keep splitting it up. You’ll never unite them. It’s the opposite of what they want. It’s like saying to a group of people: wear this fashion, no wear that fashion! Not everyone will hear all the messages, and even if they do – not everyone *can* respond. Too many war cries just create tension.”

“And applied to people, the same thing works.”

“People will change, yes, at some individual threshold that you can’t really predict. Just like the VeiVeks. So, if you want to be sure, you have to out-do each message and you end up with an arms-race. That is not a recipe for stability.”

Bishop nods. “That was my idea too. It’s actually better to be hands-off. Let people mix into stable masses – find equilibrium by themselves. If you keep on tugging, nothing ever settles down. They go unstable. The conclusion is that you have to makes them all deaf so they can’t listen.”

“It’s not much of a thesis is it?” She feels tired now, and ready to get out of here. She looks at her mobile as if to underline her impatience. “You mentioned a job,” she says. “I’m not sure what I could do.”

“If you can help us with your expertise, I can give you a position at the Police University to get you a new thesis. You can develop your ideas for a slightly different purpose. ”

She looks at him with all the scepticism she can muster. I’m a bitch, she thinks. But why? Reflex? What is there to lose?

“Well, I can think about it. It seems a bit weird to me.”

“Good. So I’d better think of my own propaganda campaign for you then.” He sucks his cheeks for a minute. “If you came to meet the others in the group, I think you’d feel a little more comfortable right away.”

“Maybe.”

“Chin up!” he laughs. “You know, someone once said: ‘Minds are like parachutes. They only work when they’re open.’”

“That’s good,” she says glumly.

45

Cathy Kim is standing in the dry heat of the little ghost town in the Utah desert. Outwardly, it appears abandoned: cheap hotels with broken doors and smashed toilet bowls. Inwardly, it has been concealing a terrible secret.

The ghosts have been haunting here.

Until a few moments ago, this has been a centre of operations for one of the worst religious fanatic groups. The place was just bursting with illegal operations.

They are in home territory here. Not far away is a little town with only eight hundred inhabitants but fifty different churches. Are they involved in this?

No one was here, no human. But a single computer connected by parabolic antenna to a network tap, was purring its operational readiness, handling coordinating activities for lists of operatives.

How can so much chaos be so organized?

There are explosives here next to bibles. This is nothing more than a terrorist camp. The blood-red rock of the surrounding desert seems to condone this stockpile of filth, as if the blood of the enemy has been congealed into boulders and cliffs. There are professional recruiting agencies operating out of this camp: preying on kids to break into computer systems, recruiting hackers while persuading them to keep their virginity. Lists of names and addresses on blocks of embedded memory. This will take some time to analyze.

“Justice is a luxury some people have to fight for.”

The baking heat makes her a little dizzy, or is it simply the impact of all this?

She wants to get back into the air-conditioned safety of the car, and have the officers take her back to civilization.

“You shouldn’t be here, Ma’am.”

Time to make Den deliver her from evil once and for all.

46

“So when are you coming back to the States?” Cathy Kim asks him cordially.

“You could come here?” Den deflects.

She barely shakes her head. “No, they won’t let us travel. It is considered too dangerous these days.”

“Well, it will be a while before I can justify actual travel,” he lies. “Too much to do over here for our mutual friends.”

He remembers her tight sensual body and feels aroused, wishing that she could be there with him at that moment; but in this situation there is also something about her that seems small and merely self serving. There are surely larger concerns to think about than his pact with her. Catalin Cortina, whom Celia has brought to him, makes her seem irrelevant. Moreover, if she is right, then Cathy is just an agent anyway, using him like the rest of them.

“Heads up,” she says. “There’s a storm brewing over the Christian radical groups here. There’s been a police find, indicating some kind of activism and corruption. Had any news from your government friends?”

He shakes his head, suppressing his immediate worry. “To be honest, I’m a bit freaked out by the religious overtones and the anti-European sentiment in some of the material they sent me.”

She nods. “Saw that one coming.”

“We might have to turn down the job.”

“That could mean losing your position within the consortium.”

“I know, but the alternative might mean losing my colleagues’ blessing.”

“Your job.”

“I can’t understand why they would turn on Europe of all places!”

“It’s not all that surprising,” she insinuates.

“What do you mean?”

“Well, look at it from an American religious perspective. The clash of secular and religious forces is a point of divergence between Europe and the United States. Here in U.S., we’ve always been a religious country. People don’t think twice about it. Even with the separation of church and state, people embrace religion without question. This dichotomy is about power, and Europe would not accept a religious leadership in the same way as Americans would. So, if you are in favour of Christian power, you have to blame Europe for putting a spanner in the works: France, Britain, even Catholic Italy and Spain these days.

It is easy to see why Europe's failure to act makes people over here see you as a threat."

"I hadn't thought about it like that," he admits. "I thought people were more concerned with bashing Islam than in beating one another over the head with their own religion."

"Check. Welcome to politics."

Den nods. He's seen enough of it, now that you mention it. "So, how are you getting on?" he asks her. "I'm still investigating some leads."

She pauses. "Well, I got it covered I guess. Looks like you are a definitely a centrally important person in this. But there are others sneaking in from the sides."

Some anonymous Spanish beauties. . ., he thinks.

Kim seems to toy with something, then decides to share. "And I think I've figured out what might be going on now," she says. "If we're still helping each other."

"What?"

"Well, between you and me, there was a piece on the information feeds recently about the find out in the Utah desert. They uncovered an operation by Christian fundamentalists to gain financial control over the political parties."

"Financial control?"

"Yes. The root of power."

"Both parties or just one?"

"Both. You see, they have just one chance to pass a bill through the house giving the church equal powers to government over the police and armed forces."

"What? You're . . . That's unbelievable. . ."

"It's been hushed up, for sure, but it seems quite certain to be put to the house with partial home voting."

"Meaning what?"

"That government and the people get to vote on it, at short notice."

"And you think that's what they want me to help with? I'm supposed to hand it to them on a plate by prep'ing people for the choice?"

"Sounds like that's the deal. That's what they will pay you for, in the end, if you deliver. Look at this." She sends him a picture that seems to have been taken from TV or perhaps a billboard.

He looks at it and frowns in disbelief. Apparently, they have another advertising consultant working with them too.

Anyone could make a killing with this. At least in terms of money. If they take it, the company would profit and they would be guaranteed work for a long time to come. But at what cost? Immortal souls. When advertising gets all kittens and puppies, you know there is some major evil going on.

But, of all the things that ought to be occupying his mind, at this moment, all he can think about is how he can persuade Ms Cortina that his intentions are honourable.

*

“The bill is not popular.”

“That is not an acceptable admission. The country is falling apart and we have to stop it.”

“So we should centralize our power for the good of the nation – and our allies. But the first step is to get it through here.”

He winces at a spot of heart-burn.

“Well, senator,” a non-American voice says. “America seems to have been losing its grip on its people for some time now.”

“And that is why we need this game. It could be our most significant opportunity to rein in the Internet for our purposes.”

“Demonstrations have been held in several large cities. If this unrest continues we might have to bring in the military.”

“We need to dispel the attention.”

“We’ll have to move the research departments – move them underground.”

“You mean close ranks? That could be dangerous.”

“We can trust the intelligence agencies, but who else?”

“The control has become too decentralized. It is my opinion that we need to rein in the pieces under a central control again.”

A glum face says, “That is the paradox isn’t it?”

“What do you mean.”

“We had to ask the help of the world, in order to get this done in the first place. Now we’re pulling out because we feel that we have lost control.”

“It’s Dubai all over again,” another says.

“Well that is what I have been saying all along,” says an exasperated voice. “You tend to forget that the rest of the world thinks. Not everyone falls under the banner of your sweet indoctrination programme. Not everyone’s kids pledge allegiance every goddamn day!” An odd look of fierceness seems to come over him.

Dean simply stares back coldly. He has heard this kind of criticism before from the enemies of America, but never from within his inner circle of allies. No one has ever dared to say such a thing in a closed session of the Lion’s Den.

“If that is what you think, then you cannot possibly help us to meet our ideals. America will not tolerate dissent. We stand for freedom. If you cannot agree with that, then you have no place among us.” His arm is hurting now. What is the matter with the world today?

“ ‘Will not tolerate dissent?’! ” he laughs. “My god, listen to yourself. Allegiance to freedom. It is a basic contradiction. Are we really so goddamned brainwashed that we can’t see it?” The man seems to have had a drink or two and will probably regret this outburst before long, Den thinks.

“Sir, you need to get a grip on yourself. This non-cooperative thinking in Europe is the greatest danger to American policy.”

“You assume that the American way is the only way.”

“It is our way. This political competition that the E.U. is trying to foster is self-destructive. It is undesirable and. . .”

He stabs: “You mean you might not get your way any more? You might not have carte blanche, tabula rasa. . .”

“America has kept the peace for decades. Our foreign policy is second to none.”

“Are you sure? Is not diversity of opinion our greatest asset?”

“Freedom is our greatest asset. That is what we stand for.”

The senator has fallen for the biggest slogan of them all.

“But not democracy. What you talking about is actual dictatorship.”

“Leadership, sir. Leadership is a tower: a domineering monument. Democracy, what is that? It is sprawling ecological compost heap of opinions. The singular voice of a strong leader will always stand out against the festering swamp of democratic discussion. With democracy, we have to assume that there is enough gelatine in the mix to allow it to set as the heat cools off. Otherwise, you are left with a shapeless mess. We cannot have turmoil in America, and we cannot let the wishes of other nations, or morally decrepit individuals influence our great institutions of church and commerce.”

“The powers of government are being eroded by peoples’ greed for democracy and autonomy. We have to show better judgement in the kinds of message we expose our people to if we are going to preserve this lifestyle that we all take for granted.”

“I am starting to think that America has finally gone off the deep end in its delusions of righteousness. Taking money from the church purse now as well as its people and accepting its authority. I’ve never seen anything like it.”

“The Iranian bonyads? They are like government controlled ‘charities’ that channel the wealth of the nation into political causes.”

“Goddamn it,” mutters the dissenter. “I am so sorry to have to say this. You are all goddamn mad!”

The senator rises. “Sir, you are no longer welcome here. I think you will need to cool off for a while.” He beckons to the secret service agents standing nearby. They move in.

The man turns pale and his voice takes on a stammer. “You can’t hold me! That’s outrageous! This is a *game*, senator! Not goddamn nuclear war! Where

is your sense of perspective?"

The senator shakes his head. "You are wrong, sir. The future of America may well be jeopardized. The world needs class systems and it needs superpowers. We cannot afford to relinquish our hold. We must simply keep it at any cost. That means that our way is the true way. There is no room for devolution."

He looks out of the window of the meeting room to the lawn and the tree, feeling suddenly sick, tired and light headed. And his damned arm hurts.

"Mr. Morris, are you still there? I just bought twenty acres of rolling countryside close to a skiing resort, with room to ride horses. Do you know what expenses landscaping engineers want these days? They can practically smell us coming. I mean us in the upper echelons of government. They think they can wind us around their little fingers, and do you know, goddammit, they can!"

Damned heart burn. All this excitement, all the effort that has gone into this behind the scenes. He'll be glad when it is all over.

Through the window he can see that a large demonstration is forming outside the government offices. He is feeling a bit dizzy.

*

Den left Catalin Cortina feeling oddly off balance. Once again, he finds himself thrown into uncertainty. He has made the decision to stay in San Sebastian for a few days, while he thinks about their meeting. In spite of her practical dismissal, he does not feel yet ready to be written off.

San Sebastian is an agreeable location for thinking. There are bars here where he can hang out, places to go to enjoy himself and think. He has seen one place where the women seemed to be just waiting for someone to whisk them off their feet. But something was broken in him last night.

It was her.

She changed him, his view, not merely of his work, but of himself. He thought he was succeeding in his work; now he feels like a loser.

Suddenly, he feels the precariousness of his situation. He is clinging on to his obligations more by luck than by judgement. It is something like the sensation of skiing down a black run, in the Alps, at full speed, barely winging it, almost flying off into oblivion at each irregularity in the terrain, legs burning and shaking with the effort of standing up to the barrage of gravitational anomalies. This is not being in charge.

He has to admit that she was good. She is an expert manipulator. She has transformed his feeling of serendipitous triumph into one of minor unworthiness. She agreed to see him at his request, but rather than convincing her of his own value, she has turned the tables on him. He was putty in her hands.

She is someone to look up to, no doubt about that.

Den dials himself into the company network over a secure channel and sets up the pre-arranged meeting. After a short delay, the others are in place and they regard one another in the virtual meeting room.

"Change of plans," he announces. "We need to discuss a new idea that has been presented to me, which is something we need to hear. I'm sending you the sketch here."

"I brought in a couple of analysts from downstairs," a familiar voice says.

"This is Joost Langendijk and Carol Ann, our American expert."

Kylie interrupts. "Before we start, everyone, news flash! There is a rumour on the channels that Senator Dean has died of a heart-attack."

"Wow."

"News."

"Doesn't that potentially change the whole matter?"

"If that is true, it could mean that the game consortium would be opened up to public inspection. The house is just waiting for a chance to bypass him."

"So what about the Senator?"

"We need to make sure he's really dead."

"Give me a gun, I'll take care of it," Kylie says.

Den finds himself conflicted. "We should play neutrally for now," he says. "Until we can assess what is going on."

"The way to make this work is to let the others do the work. Let them mount their counter-attack. Let the competitor embarrass themselves or screw up. If they harm themselves, then we don't have to do it for them."

"Right. With the failing billboards, this is the best approach. If we try to put in more stuff, it will just self-destruct and no one wins."

"We could release a rumour that we are going to act soon, and provoke them to act first."

"We can move the campaign out of the game."

"Back into the real world? Interesting. . ."

"Suppose Interpol were to raid their offices about now, and found some evidence that allowed them to bring charges?"

"That would start a media frenzy just like the one after the Time article."

"It could set them back months or years."

"It would serve two purposes. It would point the finger back at them and it would make the forces of law and order look legitimate again."

"Let's put this into a model."

"Eh, boss, we might have to delay on that."

"Why?"

"We've been having a little license trouble with our software. I'm not sure what the problem is."

"Licenses?"

He nods.

“Well that must be fixable.”

“I suppose so. But it takes a little time.”

Den groans. “It used to be that you could just use something you bought.
How long?”

“They are not licenses any more. They are liabilities.”

“Don’t know. I’ve applied for renewal.”

“Another illegal form of taxation from the corporate empires,” Kylie adds.

“Kyl!”

Raj’s avatar smiles. “At least food isn’t licensed yet.”

“One step away, my friend. One step away.”

“How long?” Den asks.

“Let’s say a day.”

“A day.”

”Hey, guys. Scenario. You buy food for a dinner party and then have to force each of your guests to pay the same amount that you paid for the food, because it is licensed to the manufacturer, otherwise the food will not release its nutrients.”

“Might be technically possible,” says Langendijk. “Genetically modified food that can’t be broken down without a certain enzyme. Then sell the enzyme individually to generate extra revenue.”

They are laughing, while Den is thinking of something else entirely.

“All right, let’s stick to the point.”

“I don’t think it’s very funny at all.”

“Okay, who wants to flip for food?”

“Raj?”

“I’ll go.”

“Remember to flip on the way.”

“Bring sandwiches and sparkling water. The one in the fancy bottle. We might be working late!”

47

Thump.

Scrape.

Bang bang bang. Bang bang.

Thump.

Jesus wept! It is eleven o'clock at night!

Bang bang bang bang bang bang.

When a child, your parents told you that the gentle sound of thunder was just fairies moving house. Now, there are elephants moving in upstairs.

Scrape. Scrape.

What is that?

Scrape.

Thump. Laughter.

How could any reasonable human being, be so goddamned insensitive as to hammer nails into the goddamned wall, in this concrete goddamned box at 11:00 p.m., 23:00 hours, in the goddamned evening?

Bang BANG.

Don't they know that people have to sleep?

Have to work?

This apartment box does not know its neighbours, does not fraternize with the other life-forms that use the stairwell. There is no shared toilet. If you meet someone at the launderette, just ignore them.

From your box, you cannot tell where the sound is coming from. Contact sound reverberates, in this rabbit-hutch, like Morse code through a submarine.. You feel like a ship in a bottle that collided with its fog horn. You hate your neighbours for their insensitivity, but you it never occurs to you to think about their needs.

To hell with them. You are never likely to meet them anyway.

48

One has to admit, there is a certain austerity to it all. Someone's hard graft and industrial ambition yet clings onto the present in these old brick-hulled trading vessels. They seem like outcast elders of the global village: buildings that cry out their dereliction and alienation. They can be tolerated, but not revered by the city of today.

Shuttered warehouses, filled with prosperous memories, disused or adapted to fringe life: they have all been rejected from the city's mainstream dreams. The bricks recall a time when buildings were meticulously stacked, piece by piece, not injection-molded into computer generated spaces. Rows of individual units worked together here, in harmony, to create a functional and pleasing pattern. Unfortunately, there is no time for such rituals in the modern world.

But there is no doubt about it: this is construction from an age that tolerated texture and variety. Every brick does not have to be identical. That is surely appropriate, under the circumstances. It seems to say something about the city's policy. Where is this rugged art in the brushed aluminium and glass buildings of today? Where is the willingness toward cultural diversity, embracing the foibles of nature's own materials? Where are the open arms embracing society's minor tributaries?

Three figures descend the incline towards this riverside gallery of twisted past. Over the rickety wooden bridge that crosses the river, burrowing through unkempt trees, held in check by wrought iron railings. Rats scuttle near the water.

The arched holes, where windows once were, are now boarded up, mostly. Imagine the once hot, orange light of industry in these buildings: a crucible of molten iron lighting up the arches with its promise of wealth and purpose.

Today the bricks are painted over, first with black, *prima facie* canvas and then with luminous pop art effigies. These buildings are fit only for troubled youths and eccentric artists. This is not the slick polish of commerce and orthodoxy.

Joseph's centre lies in this outcast realm, rehabilitating disenfranchised youth from their self-imposed rejection. The buildings seem like a fitting place to locate the centre. Could some of this nobility rub off on the city's new squatters? The people of that past were more responsible, more consumed of the necessities of their survival than in imagined disputes and conflicts. This is a place to learn about the meaning of building one's legacy, and abandoning whimsical

destruction born out of the boredom and absent hope of today.

What happened to that age? Where did it go? Should we be glad that no one has to struggle for their existence anymore?

The visitors are wearing the suits of the present. They look out of place here, Joe thinks. They are church representatives: lawyers. They come with money in the form of glad tidings. They are coming to buy this centre. They want to run it, to change it. They have brought their establishment with them. One can almost taste the sour flaw of reasoning, but that is not his concern. There are no spires here. This is not where people reach out to God above. This is where God's agents lurk in the shadows to capture what souls they can.

"Our programme takes the kids who have become caught up in crime," he will tell them. "we get kids who have come straight from prison."

"The Get Smart programme seems like a success. We would hope to extend it, to bring a more Christian message to these kids," they will reply.

Is this what he wants? Is this what these kids need? What they understand is the currency of violence. Paying back. There is an unwritten rule of the street: people sort out their own problems. It's tribal.

What should he tell them? "The increasing willingness to use weapons to solve any dispute is their sickness. For a lot of them, their horizons simply don't extend any further than their own town district. A lot of disputes start just because an outsider strays into their territory. These kids have been picking up weapons to solve their problems since they were eleven or twelve."

Erland over there was convicted for grievous bodily harm. The victim was left permanently brain-damaged for the price of a piece of dope. There is a picture here to remind him of the consequences of his actions. All for the sake of enhancing his reputation on the street. Respect, so they say.

This has been a place to study modern city tribalism, to learn about it and to understand its origins. What will it become now? Will they simply try to paint over the offending surface with evangelical rituals? It might appeal to the aging wealthy right, but it is no answer to the problem. Just because someone is singing a happy song, it does not mean that they are well-adjusted.

Joe got involved in this programme out of his own conviction about Christian values. He does not recall the part of the bible where it talks about brainwashing. If the money they were supposed to get from Jonas was forthcoming, then they could turn these suits away and carry on as usual.

So they come, he thinks, to weed out the diseased element of society, not to heal it. And it is not merely these violent kids—just go down to the city's edge. There are plenty of strange, twisted people staggering or riding bikes, bent and distended by drug-alcohol abuse, looking like nothing that nature would have allowed: is this also part of what humanity is? Perhaps we are all simply insane in different ways, perversions of nature.

Jonas would have said: “You shouldn’t even talk of disease. It’s opportunism. It’s one organism that says, hey, if you’re gonna be stupid, I’ll exploit the opportunity, thank you.”

We think in static terms. Change, aging and disease: you are standing still and other stuff is getting the better of you. A little hedge trimming and weeding is fine, but killing God’s children goes beyond the reason.

“Maybe rap is a channel that can reach them,” he hears one of them say, as they approach the entrance.

They arrive at the entrance and step into the simple open room of the old mill, where Joe is waiting.

“Good morning, friend!”.

A row of bulging suits, beaming at him like expectant fruit, wearing mildew like a bad aftershave. They know their trade. Eat ’em up and spit ’em out. Infect their kernels and let them grow into diseased bushes.

There was surely a reason why God set the burning bush alight.

*

On the other side of town, Jonas prostrates his soul before the symphony. The music is a soundtrack to his troubled consternation, dark and full of the tremors of gratuitous complaint. The day has ground him down to the point at which escape was his only option. So here he must lie, resonating with the angst, until it absorbs the energy from him.

A symphonic masterpiece assumes command of its audience, physically and mentally, he thinks. He has chosen a tragic, wasteland of war-torn desolation to ease his suffering. Its wintery introduction of frigid strings gradually descends into a tar pit of inescapable, strung gravity. Deep grumbling friction fades and is replaced by a sudden race of bows hacking rhythmically like axes clearing a forest. Then, scintillating violins, herded by grave trombones, swell like portents of a pending revelation. Military snare drums snap him to his senses and the sardonic tones of the woodwind mock his optimism with their grey corroded snoring. Life is this rusty pipe – don’t expect any more from it.

The music penetrates him, violates his defences, and works its cleansing magic as if the experience of this tortured symphony is a deeply acting antibiotic for his personal strife, using up all of his emotions.

Shostakovich knows this, he thinks. He understands pain. It jars from his music.

The eleventh lifts him, shows him pride of stature, then lowers him gently to confront the hopelessness of his misery. Then just as the thought of continuing seems impossible a life-giving rain of strings pours over him and washes away the dirt and decrepitation of those treacherous woodwind vermin. Finally, thundering brass and percussive artillery shake him to alertness and leave him spent

at the climactic tidal wave of the gong. The blast flings him across the universe leaving him stranded and alone.

For minutes he cannot move or speak. Then he begins to relate once again to the objects around him: his body, his hands. He breaths and nods. The music is his confidante. He bears his soul to this music as he could to no mere human. Thank goodness he has the solitude to enjoy it. Still, the complexity of the symphony is still mere child's play compared to life itself.

He looks about his cocoon of familiarity, at the books that he has collected over the years. They are familiar and comforting; they are friends.

It is not the notes of life's symphony but the spaces in between them that heal him. His cocoon is a controlled environment in which he can exclude everything that he does not want. The nourishing familiarity cleanses his frustrations. The friendly books, old friends that don't answer back, don't complain or demand. His film collection, fantasy to transport him away as a passive spectator. His music.

The doorbell warbles, making him jump up in panic. Jonas collects himself and goes to pick up the door-phone.

"Jonas, it's Joe. Can I come up?"

"Joe?" He rubs his tired eyes. "Come in."

*

"They were like a couple of wasps, Jonas." Relentlessly and mindlessly picking away at other people's business and dirty garbage. "And they were standing there just waiting to sting at the first sign of fear. I fear *them* more than any of the kids at the centre."

"I don't know what to say."

"It's not your fault."

"Are you sure? Maybe they heard about this business over funding. It could be my fault for starting a media circus."

"The council funds. . . Everything has been turned upside down."

"I'm sorry."

"C'est la guerre."

"Funny you should put it like that. More whisky?"

He shakes his head. "I suppose I'll have to notify the other sponsors that we won't be part of these larger city projects."

"The European thing?"

"Get Smart, Save our Schools."

"No kidding."

"Thing that worries me is that some of the kids have no hope without us. People don't take care of their own in these communities anymore. I'm afraid of what could happen when we are not running the centre."

“What?”

“The kids are not all that well balanced, Jonas.”

“What might they do?”

Joe raises his eyebrows and tilts his head slightly.

“They come to us sometimes because they feel that they are lost, that no one cares about them. But other times they have been given an ultimatum that they cannot handle. They lack the social skills to resolve the crises they make for themselves.”

“And the weak shall inherit the Earth.”

“Jonas, if you have never experienced the feeling they have of being utterly trapped by circumstances—with no possible way out, then you have not contemplated suicide.”

In fact, I can relate to that, Jonas thinks.

These past days, he has understood, for the first time in his life, why someone might consider it. You are just trundling along in life, mastering your job, making everybody happy and then suddenly something happens that is utterly dangerous to that stability. You go into a blind alley that seems like a good move, but you realize that it's a cliff top. There is no way back without hurting everyone who means something to you, and there is no way forward because there are immovable obstacles in your way. Perhaps you are faced with a choice: to kill your lover or your child. How do you choose? You can't go forward. you can't go back. What other choice is there but to reset your options and start over? Remove the centre of the problem.

“Violence is often their language. It's a matter of desperation. They either have to die slowly, where they stand, or jump and get it over with quickly. But if you take your life, you know it will hurt the people you love and that makes you feel even worse. Eventually the pain threshold increases to the point where you cannot bear it anymore and you self-destruct.”

It seems like those old films from the 60's where people used to talk computers to death by giving them some logical contradiction. But where is the logic?

“I didn't mean to . . .”

“And all the Evangelical Lutheran Lawyers want is to buy a captive audience.”

Where indeed.

He thinks of Kaja, the times she calls and asks him to be there for her. And he usually isn't. Is it by choice that he prioritizes work, or is there a greater responsibility? Could she understand this at all?

Is anything important, if it is not about the two of them?

He looks at his pile of old music CDs. One for every bad mood. A pill for every malady. They seem like old friends.

"I have never understood religious communities," Jonas shakes from his head. "It all seems hostile to me. And yet sometimes the rigours of these dogmas have inspired great beauty, great music."

"The music of Bach, Chopin. . . Discipline is not a bad thing."

"Alfred Schnittke's fourth symphony, a perfect discipline of tonal religious bureaucracy. Discipline is okay, Unless it is used to suppress creativity."

"Yes."

"Did I tell you? The government has a goon squad now—auditors who check every action we take. We have no freedom of expression anymore, not in this current political climate." They will be sending more of them tomorrow. They do not need him any more. "Oh, Joe. There are times in our lives when it seems that disaster just piles on disaster and everything seems beyond repair. Don't you think?"

He frowns into a distant space and then inhales deeply as if recalling something important. "I have to back out of these project commitments. Did you ever read about S.O.S.? The organization that runs it?"

He recalls some papers in a folder. Jonas shrugs. "Rings a bell. I got sort of side-tracked."

"Save-Our-Schools. It's run by. . .well, never mind."

"Don't back out yet. Tell them you might be delayed. I haven't given up thinking about this yet."

"Is there anything you can do, if the government has already changed its mind?"

"The government is not the people. There are still some advantages to our predilection for these things." He taps on his mobile. "Bureaucracy works both ways. Tar pits might capture the wildlife, but they also stop the predators from reaching them."

Joe lifts his head, as if he is signalling incongruous pride above his flaring nostrils. "You gave me an idea, Jonas."

"An idea? You know that's strictly against government policy now?"

"There might be hope for us yet."

"Hope?"

He nods.

"For us."

"For all of us."

Jonas raises his glass. "Hope for us yet."

49

Mary is collecting and retaining. She has followed a lead from Milan to Copenhagen. She knows their key players, the principal components, the eigenvalue centres, and she has a causal tree of probabilities to bring that cartel into Denny's reach.

She knows their likes and dislikes.

She has a ninety percent full transition matrix telling them how to get there from here.

How to push them in the right direction.

She has a model with a sixty two percent probability of success.

Time to report back to her brother.

He likes to call here his pet rock.

50

“An influence agent, or succubus as we like to call them, is a virtual character whose judgement is motivated by a fuzzy goal.”

“A fuzzy goal?”

“Something that is not too blatant or obvious.”

Vibe texts Bea: *New job. I'm a succubus, baby!*

She smiles to herself, ignoring a sour look from Jonathan.

“It is guided by data from the real-time analysis of the information net. Normally in a campaign, we use an ensemble of agents, with different personality profiles and different strategies. Then we bombard the players with these encounters.”

“So people tend to imitate people they like and side against people they don't like. We can use that to influence people.”

"It's the ultimate political tool. In essence, you create an army of these succubi to manipulate people. Opinions and emotions. Eventually, they are hoping to use this against North Korea."

"Here comes Preeta."

Vibe and Preeta stare at each other from across the room, for a long instant. She has heard about Preeta from one of the others, some dribs and drabs. It was *she* who located her, who discovered her. Now here she is.

Fascination, or is it perhaps a sense of threat, halts them like deer in the headlights. How will this alter the dynamics of this little group? Who will be the alpha-female now?

Brown and blue eyes meet in space. She believes she see some admiration in the look, and then the moment passes. Vibe feels that they have looked into one another's' souls and negotiated a stand-off in that instant. They will be a team, not adversaries.

We are the same somehow, Vibe thinks.

They will talk and share later. Suspicion dissolves into knowing smiles.

"Preeta, meet Sara. Sara, meet Preeta."

"Hello, Sara," she says in an unmistakably Indian accent.

"Hi. My friends call me Vibe."

Jonathan pauses, as if sensing something in the exchange and then continues on relentlessly. Over the next few days, they have to bring her up to speed.

"So join in. Preeta is our game analysis guru. The campaign we are addressing is not just billboards, it is also these characters. We program a virtual character to go out and hunt down the right people—the right chains of people and command. Dermot knows this character technology, and you can put it together. Preeta here can tie the motive circuits into our global net analysis, to better target the right people."

"Where is Dermot anyway?"

"We are a team."

"And where do the billboards come in?"

"Eh, billboards change your environment. In a complete campaign, we control every surface, every aspect of the environment. But we don't have that kind of access to the game, through Dermot. Billboards are off limits. They are controlled by marketing companies."

"The succubus, on the other hand, has a variety of tricks up its sleeve. A basic one is NLP—Neuro-Linguistic Programming. That's when a character in the game starts to imitate your own speech patterns to make you feel comfortable. Our expert on game. . ."

"Is not here."

Bishop comes back into the room. "Has anyone seen Dermot?"

Puzzled looks.

“So,” Vibe asks. “Do you seriously believe that you can influence peoples’ behaviours and change them in any significant way?”

He nods, distantly as if recalling something personal. “Yes. Yes, I do.”

*

One could half expect to find a threatening message waiting: bag-ransom for your silence. Vibe figures that would be taking it too far. The police bitch wouldn’t want to leave any traces that could incriminate herself now would she?

And now, here she is in the heart of police central. She could probably find out all about her and even work a little magic, but the last thing she wants to do is to draw attention to herself in her first few days. There are limits even to her gall. She’ll have her way in due course.

“So, the government commissioned the game for a purpose, and now that purpose is being hijacked by others. Bishop, over there, wants to bring this back to the custodians of the law. He sees the law courts and the police as being the custodians of civil society.”

“He might be the only human being in the world who sees the pigs as custodians of anything except corruption and bullying.”

“Trust has to start somewhere,” Bishop calls out, indicating that he has sharp hearing, in spite of his years. “We can’t speak for every officer of the law on this planet. But we can work within our own sphere and try to make a positive contribution.”

Vibe gulps. Should keep mouth shut. Muffins.

“The law is taken too much for granted now,” he continues. “That is something we can change in the long run. For now, we have a specific race to win.”

So is it a war on apathy or on crime?

“What is power, people? Money and influence. Money to buy resources, Influence to change peoples’ minds. Religion is a big one today. Politicians can be bought, especially if they have been programmed in religious schools.”

“The Christian schools have their own little arms race going on with the Muslim Madrassas, to see who can indoctrinate the most.”

“But, if the money is legitimate then we can’t stop it from being used.”

“Money can buy religion as a weapon too, so it works both ways. Then religion brings in money, and finally it all accretes. People are attracted to it because others are doing it. It’s called preferential attachment and it leads to a huge contact network in little time.”

“I know about that,” Vibe says. “Scale free networks. Small worlds.”

Bishop walks through the room waving everyone towards the meeting room.

“So we now know there is going to be a public vote, and this is how its going to work. All the congress has to do is to show that a plausible poll has been

carried out. They then have the necessary contacts to essentially force it down the throat of the European Union too."

"One way you could do it would be to distract people," Preeta speculates. "Most people have some kind of selfish interest that they would rather be feeding. The central message is only on their radars because it is so strong. But, if you could tap into those selfish desires, then we can distract and compete with that singular message."

"Why didn't someone just stop it before it got started?" Vibe wonders.

He shrugs and becomes a quiet. "When systems get that complicated, with so many people involved, they take on a life of their own. No one really understands what the system does any more. It is too big to see what its really all about. Even if you try to stop some part, everyone continues doing their job. Each part seems reasonable, even if the sum of those things is a monster."

"Big is unstoppable."

"The dinosaurs died out," Sara looks around. "Emily Bronto got too big."

Bishop smiles to himself.

"No, she's right" Ivar exclaims with a rare show of enthusiasm. "It's fragile. You get blown up on some instability to a huge size because you have a lot to eat, and so you get big. Then once you *are* big, you *have* to eat a lot, or you die. You are just a big vacuum cleaner. If you don't get enough to eat one day, you die out quickly."

"An organism is not like a plant that can lose a few branches here and there. Once a major organ dies, the whole thing falls apart."

"What exactly are we talking about now?"

"Growing up and getting fat."

"Wrinkles and flab flaps. Age is a humiliating journey."

"And some carry it with more dignity than others."

"People, can we focus please?" Bishop's weary plea seems to have been issued once too often, she thinks.

"He's saying that we could maybe use the campaign's own size against it."

"The broken billboards," Preeta says. "Your wrinkles."

Bishop is rubbing his eyes.

"I think we're getting somewhere," Jonathan comments.

Vibe looks around her at the facial tremors and decides that a little self-confidence is called for. "It's probably doable," she says.

*

It's that old tree again: the power of life expunged from it long ago. The remains of it leer like an angry witch, staggered by years of discord, and petrified here, fingers and icicle nails jabbing a final accusation at its absent assailant. A

girl sits on the ground at its base, leaning against it. Tired shards of bark wither around her in a solemn benison of extended death. The bark falls as snow and the world turns white.

She stays quietly in the little clearing, surrounded by towering trees, leaden with their snowy load. It is quiet and crisp, a beautiful night. Even now she cannot fail to appreciate the quietly beauty, the starry sky and the moonlight shadows of the trees. A slight breeze is blowing. Slowly it picks up and the pendulous hulks begin to sway in a slow and lofty rhythm. The wind picks up steadily, chilling her to the bone.

Then she has been standing still for too long and her joints are seizing up in the cold. The trees seem to rise to the call of the wind, swaying in concert back and forth, back and forth. The shadows create a shimmering effect and the gusting wind shakes loose a momentary blizzard of snow, blasting it into the clearing, showering her in fine crystals and cutting through her with an icy blast. Then, as soon as it began, it is over and all it quiet again. The night is quiet and the wind that rolled off the mountain is silent.

She moves a few feet forward, crunching the snow with her boots.

“Are you coming back in?”

She awakens with a start.

They are all still working late. She should go home, but it feels like a betrayal. They are still trying to get in touch with someone called Dermot.

“Look at this rally. It is a political rally aimed at getting religious people in contact with the selfish right-wing parties. And it works a treat. Why do you think that is?” Ivar is looking at some video.

“I don’t get it. How can you claim to be a Christian and support these anti-immigration, right wing money launderers?”

Bishop has gone home. Jonathan likes to take on his role, in loco parentis. “The whole underlying *raison d’être* for religion relies on the fact that people want something out of it. They want protection. Salvation from God. Protection of their mortal body and immortal soul. If you can get it from a politician in advance, you don’t have to worry too much about your ritual obligations.”

“Doesn’t sound very Christian.”

“No. We are not talking about the genuinely spiritual people in the flock. We are looking at the habitual church goers: those who go to church to reap some divine benefit. They are not ideologists, they are the bewildered herd of hangers on. They are often old age pensioners who are angry and confused by the times they are living in. They don’t follow what is going on. They just want to be looked after.”

“These are the dangerous people. They are the ones that the Christian lobby is trying to activate. They are spoiled and they feel that they have earned the right

to demand something for themselves. They belong together: the church and the right wing egotists.”

“Let’s get a beer.”

*

She is going to help them. She has made up her mind.

Everyone in the team is too distracted to see the wood for the trees. That means it is not going to happen without her. Is it really her responsibility? Maybe it doesn’t matter whose responsibility it is.

Vibe knows, from the mountain patrols made by her little robots, that damage begets damage. Once something has fallen into a state of neglect, it will attract further abuse that compounds its misfortune. People treat stuff with derision if it looks like it’s already been spoiled. So the aim is to pick up the litter as quickly as possible. She knows this stuff.

They can set up a game with influence agents who create damage and robots that fix it. The math tells her that she should look in the most connected places in this virtual landscape of interconnections. That will tell her where to position her robots at any given moment.

She sketches the idea to Jonathan, in private.

“What’s your plan?” Jonathan asks.

“Concentrated mayhem,” she grins.

Preeta joins them. “Can’t I persuade anyone to call it a day?”

“In a minute. Sara’s just about to explain her idea.”

“The theory of agent cooperation is quite straightforward. It’s all about building cooperation from free will.”

“Oh my god,” Preeta laughs. “Misplaced altruism.”

“Okay, here’s how it works. We try to induce a cooperative avalanche. To begin with there is no reason for anyone to help each other out. They might have skills that they can borrow from one another, but there is nothing that forces them to help each other or work with coordinated behaviour.”

“And you want to use succubi to recruit other succubi.”

“Or actual game players.”

“Each one will target its own specialist group.”

She imagines a naked woman and a man taking her from behind in some game simulation, saying: “Oh baby, if you vote for them, they will destroy us with their puritan values. We might never be able to meet like this again!” The man would of course choose what is most important to him.

“What the succubi have to do is to make an agreement. That means there has to be an incentive, and it means they have to make a contract about what it is they are going to do. It has to be a two way contract.”

“So if enough of these agreements can be made, they start to form a team?”

“But a team is not a society. . .”

“Well, it is a prototype society. We start with our nomadic hunter gatherers, then they start to gravitate. They bind to each other together by grooming one another – forming bonds. You scratch my back, et cetera. One monkey pulls nits out of the other and they reciprocate and the payoff is access to a nice orgasm at the end of it. Whatever.”

Jonathan coughs.

“Of course, all of this grooming is pretty expensive, so after a while they figure out the principle of a Trusted Third Party: the leader or god. It is actually cheaper to form a group by tying yourself to a common point than by tying yourself to everyone else in the group.”

“Self-organizing government?”

“Yup. Essentially, they pledge allegiance to a head monkey, or whatever and in doing so form an implicit group. It’s like joining a club. If you’re a paid member, you get the benefits of being a group. There’s an implied contract. It’s cheaper than maintaining contact with every single individual. Of course, the downside is that you then are connected to people you haven’t verified for yourself.”

“That’s what has happened to the church though right?”

“Yes. So we have to build something stronger and then attack their weak spots.”

“Where?”

Preeta picks up a pad of paper and a pen and places it in front of them. “Draw him a picture.”

Vibe grins.

She smiles at him, feeling smart and useful. “Good thinking, Batgirl. Here. Draw, say, ten blobs for the different agents. Now draw a line between every pair of blobs. There are nine lines coming out of every blob. That means that every blob has to behave nicely to nine others who are going to punish it if it doesn’t. If it breaks one of its obligations, it still have eight others to keep it in line.”

“Okay.”

“Now ask what happens if we have a centralized government. Now we pick one of the nodes as representative of the others, and we draw one line from each of the nine subordinates to the centrally governing node. Now there is only one line from each of the subordinates. It is very cheap to maintain, but if a line gets broken, then they are unbound by obligations. Then they are free of any order—they have fallen outside the system. It is quite precarious.”

“But the central node still has nine lines.”

“True. The central node is still obliged to do as much work as before, but the chance of keeping all its agreements is much smaller, because the likelihood of

the other agreements being broken is so much greater. That's where you try to break it up."

"If you can."

"Isn't that what someone said today? At some point an operation becomes so big — so complex that no one really sees what it is anymore. It becomes too big for anyone to comprehend. It becomes a self-sustaining living organism. If you suddenly change your mind and try to kill it, all of its parts will resist, try to protect themselves."

"You ought to nip these things in the bud," she agrees. "But if you can cut the right channels of communication." She strikes through the central nodes in her picture.

"You know, someone once told me that the reason the Nobel peace prize was in Oslo rather than Stockholm was because Norway had never started a war. Now here we are planning a war."

Vibe thinks of her father. He would have laughed at the idea that Norway was so squeaky clean. He once said that it was true enough that the raping and pillaging of the Vikings did not count as declaring war since it was just individual misadventure, not sanctioned by the state. So really, Norway was just being rewarded for its political backwardness at the time. Her mother, who was not famous for her sense of humour, had found this flippant tomfoolery an affront to Norway's dignity and had told them so.

Text from Bea: "Drinks?"

She texts Bea: "Want to get to know new girl here. Meet up later?"

"All right, time out," she declares.

"Thank god. . . so we can go home now?"

*

"My government would not support me, so I am supporting them," Vibe tells Preeta. They have found their way into the underground club, where Preeta found her friend. She considers it a celebration of her freedom.

"It is something I learned from this game I have been playing. Sometimes you have to take a loss to move forward. I came here because I realized I didn't have to wait for approval of my advisor to figure this out. Call it arrogance or maybe inspiration. My dad's always been a bad influence on my like that. And then the game reminded by of my duty."

"So what was your revelation?"

"Just something. It occurred to me that there is more going on here than what I am doing. All this stuff I've been learning for the VeiVeks: it's all based on old studies in social sciences, mathematical models that were done years ago. But those people seem to have forgotten those old models they came up with, so now we have to teach it back to them."

"And you are willing to spend all this time and effort working on something you are not even sure you believe in?"

"Sometimes you've gotta climb the mountain just to see if what you're looking for is up there," she notes, from personal experience. "You have to take a certain risk."

Preeta nods. "I think Dermot would not agree. He would say it was inefficient."

"So who is this Dermot, anyway?"

I keep wondering that myself. "Mystery man." She rolls her eyes a little. "He is a very good game programmer that Mr. Bishop recruited from a local company. But he is a little bit of a computer geek, I think. He is not so convinced of the importance of this work. I think he has other things on his mind."

"When do we get to meet him?"

"He ought to be here now. He's not showing it, but I think Bishop is furious that he has not been in to work. We have no idea what he's doing. He is holding us back now. None of us knows how to animate these agents like he does."

"I could probably figure it out," Vibe suggests carefully. "Maybe not as well as him, but if he's not here. . .at a push."

"Something tells me he will show up."

It's my fault, she thinks. I have to put things right.

She casts her mind back to the evening when she left him at the bar and he fled like a scolded animal. It was not a nice thing to do to him. He seems so fragile, not hardened to the world as she is. She sacrificed his confidence for her own, as though she ate his soul and became stronger. No, that is being too melodramatic, but it doesn't change the fact that it is her fault. She will make it right.

"So, what's it been like for you meeting the group?"

Vibe shrugs. "Okay. not that different from the College really. What about you? You haven't been here so long yourself from what I understand."

"A few weeks. I am getting used to it. Even the darkness. Do you have a boyfriend?"

She shakes her head. "Not as we speak."

"Looking?"

Should she tell her about Peter Green? Maybe not tonight. Besides, what is that really all about? She doesn't know what to think anymore.

"You?"

Preeta shakes her head.

"Someone you left behind?"

"No, no one."

What is happening far away in Kuala Lumpur? Are they okay? Her friends could be suffering because of her penchant for flight.

“So we have to fix you up with someone?”

“I’m fine for now, thank you.”

Are the Asian gangs still after her? Were they ever after her? Was it merely a ruse to recruit her? Her head is still dizzy with the possibilities. Perhaps it is time to stand and fight her tormenters, whoever they are?

There is something to be learned from Vibe. She seems all too ready to confront things; she doesn’t run away. Can you really steer your destiny by running? When these succubi learn to speak Punjabi, perhaps it will be possible to make a difference to the Indo-Pakistani hinterlands.

Preeta watches the Interpol channels carefully every day, with the help of her worms and assimilation agents. She means to know if they really want to find her and if her friends are all right. And if no information surfaces, then it could be because there never was any gang. Nothing yet. In a sense, the very project they are working on now gives her a way to draw a line in the sand. If she can borrow Vibe’s courage, she could make a difference.

“So you know about the police database,” Vibe slips in. “How would I go about finding someone in the force?”

“Internationally?”

“No, here. When I was up in the mountains, I left something behind.”

Preeta wheedles the story of her backpack out of her, and Vibe tells it will a mixture of girlish indignation and cheeky bravado.

“How are you going to get it back?”

“I thought I would try contacting Frank first. He was nice.”

“You could go back?”

“Are you kidding? I don’t want to make things worse.”

“Are you going to report the woman?”

“Why? What’s the point?”

“Smuggling?”

“People have been smuggling ever since taxes were invented.”

People have different ideas of right and wrong.

But who is she to judge? In the past few weeks, she has not only fled from responsibility into an unknown future, merely for her own selfish gain, she has broken every imaginable taboo from her upbringing. She would be chopped up and burned alive if her family knew about her behaviour.

Vibe is a different kind of creature altogether, she thinks. She is sleek and elegant, but tough at the same time, like a Hollywood heroine, not like a Bollywood princess. And now that she has confided her story, Preeta can channel her admiration of her to see that there is a template for her own life in there. If she could become more like this Sara.

But has she really experienced the same kind of danger? Bravery is easy until you have felt the fingers of inevitable surrender touch your most vulnerable

parts.

“I don’t know if Bishop really thinks I can do the job without a lot of help. I don’t want to leave now and make a bad impression. Besides, I don’t want to shatter his squeaky image of me.”

“Squeaky? You think? Why is it that old people always underestimate young people?”

“Wisdom comes with age?” Vibe jokes.

She laughs. “Prejudice comes with age. Knowledge, if you’re lucky.”

“I want to show him I can.”

“Good for you.”

“We can do it together.”

Preeta. “Yes. I think we can.”

Vibe regards her with a sly look. “So, tell me your story,” Vibe probes. “One of the boys was telling me it sounds exciting.”

Preeta goes blank. “That’s a long story. Maybe it should wait for another time.”

Vibe shrugs. “Okay.”

“I have a better idea.”

“What?”

“What about maybe you can help me find some new clothes? I have been trying to do some shopping since I came here.”

The fires of a different daemon summon a mischievous sparkle in Vibe’s eyes. “Oh. . .now we’re talking.”

She consults her mobile and starts to text a brief message into her wrist band.

“So you’ll take me shopping?”

“Hmmm. I think we need to introduce you to my friend Bea. You’re right. It’s about time we did a little prospecting.”

51

“I see it as my duty to be a kind of agent provocateur, Señor Morris. You are a yea sayer.”

“I’ve made a career of it,” he replies with sarcasm.

Den suppresses a rising frustration. His meeting is not working out as he had hoped. Catalin Constanca Alexandra Cortina has conceded interest in the fact that he did not simply run home with his tail between his legs, after their last meeting. She has made herself available for a rematch. It has not changed much, however. He might have won a little attention from her critical eye, but he has a long way to go before he can claim to have her respect.

She has agreed to meet him, for a second time, this time away from her impressive and distracting home. The little courtyard café nestles amongst the historical buildings of the old town. He expected that this neutral territory would remove her obvious advantage, but he is beginning to wonder.

She looks at him with an almost patronizing derision. Their sparring is not entirely friendly, he knows.

"Really? In my experience, Señor Morris, when people say they are looking for a career, what they mean is that they have no idea what to do. They are, in fact, looking for guidance. They want a place to belong and be held by the hand. They are not ready to move society forward by themselves, they are merely hoping to hitch a ride into retirement."

"And you think I am such a person."

"Are you telling me that you want to make a difference now, or are you simply changing allegiances?"

He summons all of his self-control, stuffing his ego a box that he can open to release the scream later. "You go out of your way to insult me," he says calmly. "Is this how you usually do your business?"

"Here in the Basque we like to be direct. I do not have time for time-wasters. I have taken on an enormous task and it consumes me."

"But you run a business along side your other activities. You know that we have to make a living from our work."

"At the expense of principles?"

"Aren't there some principles that have to be compromised to live in the real world?"

"That depends on the skill of the individual."

"Or on the constraints of your company."

"Ah, a company man," she chides. "My company looks after me. I love my company."

"But you are also a company woman, surely," he presses, barely concealing his exasperation with her. Is she trying to make him show weakness?

"Companies can be both awesome and terrible at the same time," she dodges. "Godlike and mind numbing. They lure you in like the wolf in the Little Red Riding Hood, yes? They give you your hood and tell you where to look, what to see, when to open and close your eyes. Then they give you a kind of life plan, to replace whatever you might have had. They promise to save your soul

by delivering you from idleness, while they make you sign it away to the fires of hell, forcing you against others in competition.”

“You’re talking about workers, not management.”

“Are you sure?”

“I don’t see myself in that position.”

“You probably help to design indoctrination packages for companies.”

“That is one of the things we do, yes.”

“And this is not for management too?”

She’s right, he thinks. *Damn it.*

He attempts to maneuver out of her trap. “So you don’t think it is possible for someone like me to want to do the right thing? Isn’t that a bit hypocritical? What makes you so much better?”

“Actions speak louder than words, Mr. Morris. I am still waiting to see what you will do. I would like nothing more than to have you as an ally, but which gods do you worship?”

“I don’t think I worship. . .”

“I think you worship perfection, for a start. You need approval for what you do.”

He nods. “You might be right. But I am willing to listen to criticism. Can you say the same?”

“Bravo. Listening is one thing. But will you take the necessary decisions? Will you implement the necessary measures to make things happen?”

She lifts her hands and looks up, as if reaching out, but always her burning gaze refocuses on his.

“Education has become my main priority. It is where everything begins. It will be either our future or our epitaph.”

“I can see that. But what can someone like me do about that?”

“But that is what someone like you must tell someone like me. That is your job, your speciality. Marketing is a subtle thing, I think. How can you bring this message to the world?”

“I suppose there are ways.”

“What about that book that recently became a bestseller, something that everyone is talking about. A conspiracy that makes everyone curious. Just that one book might stimulate thousands of new readers to become literate. A simple trash novel might have a huge positive effect on the world. Is that not a significant result? So much better than making people play passive games. How could you do the same in Africa or America?”

“Well, games are not just games anymore. They are whole environments. We might have actually come back full circle—to the point where people are making their own entertainment with what they find in the games. There is actual thinking involved in gaming now.”

"In research, our budgets are controlled by the opportunities programmes. That defines the areas on which one is allowed to concentrate. Huge amounts of money are thrown away on trend setting. But as a marketing manager you could define new trends. You can make things cool or necessary."

"That is what the game consortium wants," he agrees. "There doesn't have to be a contradiction between encouraging learning and sending the messages that they want to send."

"And what are these messages? Believe in the authority of the President? Believe in the authority of God and the Church. These are all very well, but they are not the messages that will save society in the long run. They are a plaster on a sore—one that will hurt when you have to rip it off again."

"I am not a Christian, by any stretch of the imagination, but I can see the value of rebuilding community. The argument is that mobiles have effectively isolated people, by . . ."

"I know the arguments, Señor. They might be true in parts of Europe or Russia and Japan, but in the U.S.? People have a culture of talking there. They blabber even more than the people of Spain! All right, they might not say anything significant to anyone off mobile, but they can still look one another in the eye. No, the problem is the fragmentation. The need for guidance and welfare. Keep me safe, at any cost, even if the cost is my individuality, my soul."

"A deal with the devil?"

"When people expect the state or the environment to look after them, then they have lost the human spirit, the will to survive. They would rather sue someone if it rains and they get wet, than find a way to adapt and learn from the mistake. What they need is not a prayer group, but the presence of mind to make critical observations about the world. By telling them to accept the authority of a government or a church, all they have done is to stick people together with some glue. It is artificial. If people are transmitters of ideas, not just receivers, if they mix and talk and criticize one another—that is how a society works."

"But the game consortium is trying to do exactly that."

"Do you believe that? I think they have you wrapped around their, what you say, little finger?"

He ignores her thrust. "You have some interesting perspectives," he says simply. "You've told me about a side of things that I had not thought about and I want to go back to High Wycombe and think through what you have told me. It would be helpful if you were more supportive of the effort. I didn't have to come here, and I don't have to help you now."

"But I don't want you to help me. I want you to do it for its own sake."

"It could be no other way."

"Why did you come here?"

Tell the truth, she will not believe anything else.

“Why? Because, as part of my research I am trying to identify the most important individuals in the game consortium. Your name came up, for obvious reasons. I wanted to know if I could use you as a vector in a campaign.”

“And instead, I have infected you?”

“There is a certain irony,” he agrees.

“You know, Mr. Morris, when I started this game idea with the others, I believed that the game project could be used to do considerable good in the world. I still think so, but that is not everyone’s motivation.”

“And you can’t persuade the other board members of your mission?”

“This co-called inner circle does not exactly seem to be on the ball. Even I can see that they don’t know what they are doing. They are split and some of them are caught up in the Christian religious movement.”

“So you continue by yourself.”

“No, not by myself. I have many allies. I would like you to be one of those allies.”

“But only as a true believer.”

“Exactly. You have the power to interest people in a focused way, even while working for others.”

“Perhaps I am not an interesting enough person?”

“I think that you are more interesting than your understand yourself. But you are too willing to please others to get ahead. Please understand me, Mr. Morris. I believe passionately in what I do and I will invest in this goal, not because I am a philanthropist, but because it is our only survival option.”

Den picks up his almost empty glass of water and swirls the ice around.

“It’s not just me. I have to persuade the people I work with.”

“Now you are a big man—a figurehead.”

He ponders. “It seems like a small thing, a change of style. To make people use their minds. To ask questions. To think about what they see.”

“These opportunities are born of our little weaknesses.”

“Then here’s to those moments of weakness,” he salutes with his glass and drinks the rest of the water. “If what you say is true, they won’t last long anyway, once people start to cotton on.”

She nods. “If more people start to think for themselves you will have to rethink your strategy. But I think that is something you have to do anyway in your business.”

He nods. “I think I can sell the idea to my company. The game consortium just have to like the results we produce. They don’t even have to be aware that there is an ulterior motive. As long as we can still make money.”

“You will have to be careful. They are not stupid, at least not in that way.”

“They seem to think I am the expert on this. I can bring them around, pull their strings.”

"Perhaps they are really pulling your strings, as you put it?"

"You keep implying that. Why do you think I am so inept?"

"Because you are a yea sayer, because you seek approval."

"No, give me some credit. I think that I have been getting what I want out of this, and I've done quite well so far."

"Or they make you think so."

He sighs, beyond anger now. "You don't have a very high opinion of me."

"Perhaps you have too high an opinion of yourself?"

Here we go again, he thinks.

Is she right? Will he join her cause, not because he believe that her cause is righteous, but because he still needs her approval as a woman. She has starved him of his masculinity, and he wants it back. Is that why he will do her bidding? He shudders, realizing that he is not even sure.

They seem to be leaving. Cortina rises, taking some papers from the table. A pen flies out of her hands; she lunges after it, but it lands on the ground. Den bends down to pick it up and hands it to her and sees her smiling at him, cruelly.

"So you think you are pulling the strings?" She smiles: "Sweet Señor Morris, I do love it when a man goes on his knees before me."

*

Den pushes open the door of his High Wycombe house and pries off his shoes. He goes to the kitchen to administer that universal English remedy for every malady from a slight chill to broken bone: the cup of tea. It is raining cats and dogs in the chalky green countryside and he feels damp and cold after his trip to San Sebastian.

His housekeeper has been here again, tidying up his things so that he cannot find them. How many times must he tell her to leave the goddamn things alone? He leaves her explicit instructions not to move his junk, and she defies his wishes, and puts things away where he cannot find them.

"Listen, Mr. Den," she says, with her undefinable accent. "you cannot live like this. You are a respectable man."

Telling him how to live in his own house. What is it her house now? He retaliates by leaving his things untidily strewn about. It is almost open warfare between them. He is paying her good money to come here, and she still has him frightened of doing something wrong in his own house.

There is a stack of good old-fashioned paper post on the kitchen table.

"You should pay your bills on time," she tells him.

He always waits for the first reminder which invariably provokes moral outrage from her.

"That is not very decent, Mr. Morris."

“Betty, don’t tell me how to run my affairs.”

“Suit yourself. Don’t blame me when they throw you in gaol or come and break yuh windows.”

He makes his tea and a couple of crackers of unpasteurized Camembert with black pepper, and takes them into the living room, enjoying the sensation of a thick pile carpet under his feet. A little electric light makes the room a cozy haven from the great outdoors. Rain splatters from its grey home onto the fake latticed windows. He flicks on the gas fire and puts on some classical music.

It seems like a long time since he was here last. It soothes him to know that he has a place which is his own. The living room is nice, and the bedroom, but the rest of the house is a sterile showpiece. He rarely invites anyone here, unless it is for his pleasure.

The house seems too full of trophies, he thinks, for the first time he can recall. They seem to jump out at him now. He cannot recall their being so prominent before. Not the ostentatious sporting variety, with mirrored silver cups, but reminders of things that have meant something to him: framed academic accomplishments, prizes for their work over the last ten years, some souvenirs of the women he has known. He would keep pictures of them all if he could, to savour their beauty.

He looks through his post. There is a postcard here, a good old fashioned postcard from the Florida Keys. Celia Waites. There she is again, intruding into his thoughts. It is a comfortable feeling to think of her. And it is truly flattering that she thinks so much of him. How could that be?

Is he the one to save her, from boredom, from domineering abuse? Her husband is a philandering bully. She is his trophy, but he cares nothing for her. For years, she has been beaten physically and psychologically into submission, until finally she identifies that abuse with the strength that protects her.

The devil you know.

He is her dream of a better life.

Den is no angel when it comes to sticking to a single partner, but he has never bullied anyone, never been violent or made a promise that he broke. No one could seriously compare him to that man. He feels genuine compassion for her. She is entirely wasted on him.

Den closes his eyes, wearily. So, here he is in his Englishman’s castle, wondering about the course of the future. The voyage started bravely enough, with support of crew and company, but the sirens of the sea are calling to him to change course. They have finally unnerved him. How does one navigate blindly in such treacherous waters?

He needs to sit and ponder these issues carefully. Isn’t that the only way to plan his next move? Den has never considered himself to be an overtly thoughtful

or deeply introverted man, but sometimes such work goes with the job. You just have to knuckle down.

He reclines for a while in the sensation of home. The feeling will last a few minutes, then he will go and check in with his sister, as duty demands. When did the trappings of responsibility attach themselves so insistently to him?

Maybe Cortina is right. He is merely a yea sayer. "All right, gov. Right you are. Whatever you say." How will that help him to resolve this paradox?

Surely there is no logical resolution to the conundrum; there is no calculus of truth, which correctly identifies the profitable path through the rocks. And profit by whose accounting scheme? Is he headed for moral or financial bankruptcy?

However he cuts it, he cannot see any natural way of reconciling the antipodes: faith and blind authority versus conflict and scientific curiosity. They are oil and water. They simply do not mix. Trying to conceal a message of learning in a message about faith would be like having a snake claim that it hasn't eaten a rabbit.

He mulls and wallows, exhausted from his travel, but too agitated to fall asleep. He should not come here to think my himself. That was probably a mistake. Being alone merely ferments indecision and insecurity. He relies the assurance of others around him to support or revoke him. Cortina is right. He does not have the self-assurance to make the big decisions. Like the very people he wants to appeal to, he needs the approval of a higher authority: perhaps not a god or a boss, but someone, just someone to lean on.

We don't do that anymore. It's old fashioned to need someone.

He has his mobile. He can always call someone. But what does that really say about him? Real explorers, the real movers and shakers do not need such crutches. They accept the responsibility of their own decisions and choices. Cortina is right. He lets people push him around, all the time convincing himself that it is he who holds the reins.

He recalls the battery-hen, stupified faces on the flight home from America. There is no doubt that people accept what they are given.

We have become zoo animals, incapable of living in the real jungle.

She is right, of course. There seems little doubt about that. But what can he possibly do about it? Can he afford to let the Christians have their vote? Their right to exercise opinion is not so bad, but what if they get their way in the long run? Would it plunge the West back into a dark age of ignorance and subservience? A few years ago, the idea would have seemed absurd, but that was before mobile communications tore at the fabrics of civil society.

For America, society is already more authoritarian, but it floats on a sea of chatter that binds people more strongly than here. Europeans think that society means a welfare check and a strong dose of bureaucracy.

Is it even up to him to make the decision? After all, suppose he does their bidding—succeeds in a campaign to get them their vote of power, it needn't interfere with other responsibilities of his job or his company. He could satisfy Cortina in part, through some of the messages he has promised to market. There is authority and pride in learning, but there is nothing much to learn from authority.

But there is the paradox of her ideology. Authority is about decree, proclamation, edict. So doesn't that mean that, if you are against blind faith, it ought to be up to everyone to decide for themselves what they want? Isn't the idea of making up peoples' minds for them then hypocritical?

There is no guarantee to be able resolve this conundrum. And if he can't do it, then he can't do it. At least he has tried. But who does he let down? How does one minimize the loss of face?

Sometimes, if you leave things alone, they will somehow work out right by themselves. He doesn't have a better idea right now. It's just that, above all, he hates leaving things to chance.

*

It's a whitewash. But they have had an idea. It came from playing the game itself. So far, they have been trying to force feed ideas, but this is just provoking game players to rebel. It is too authoritarian. Too obviously manipulative. It is like listening to your parents tell you what to do. But suppose you could make education seem subversive to the establishment, then teenagers would go for it, as well as more radical adults. The hip-hop gangs would rebel against this straight away, although they usually respond only to instructions that come by rap.

Den realizes that he is just doing exactly what the U.S. government groups want. This whole adventure seemed like the best way to wheedle his way into the driving seat, but somehow he has realized that everyone is really making him jump through hoops. At least it should be moving him up the ladder where he will be in a position to do the same to others later. Right now it is Cortina who worries him the most.

What we need is some radical opposition. A punk movement, or something harmless but attractive? Of course that might be dangerous. If we encourage them to learn independently, then there is a greater chance that they will fall outside the game parameters, out of their control. It is a potentially self-destructive strategy that Cortina is suggesting.

His head is going around in circles.

Mary will sort this out for him. He needs Mary.

Den pulls himself out of his chair and goes into the room where he keeps his combo. He dons glasses and gloves and drops himself into the VR.

He finds Mary on a park bench, outside the Savoy, in central VLondon. She is reading a newspaper whose surfaces shimmer and change with colourful advertising. It is a sunny day and the place is visually quiet, but for the paper. A few angels are flapping around with their banners. The Muslims lose out in this competition, he thinks, not being allowed to make images of their faith. They have to play a different game.

Den checks over his programme list from their last meeting. He gave her several priorities, including the latest leads from San Sebastian.

He admires Mary's slick graphical appearance. She is a work of art, there is no doubt about that, yet somehow he does not feel the same thrill at meeting her that he has done in the past. His emotional centres are already taxed to saturation just coping with the present crisis.

"Hey, sweetheart," he says, trying to feign a convincing enthusiasm. For the first time, this little game seems like an empty exercise.

"Hi, Denny. Howz things?"

"Fine," he lies, not altogether convincingly.

"That doesn't sound like my big brother. Low spirits?"

"I'm okay. Tell me what you've got." That's right: down to business, don't spend time talking to the simulation. Just get the information and be done with.

"Nice day," she remarks, looking around. It's all part of the illusion. "I've been interacting with some other agents this week."

"Not players?"

"No. Specialists. They are putting together a project that matches most of the search parameters in your list."

"Most? Specify."

"Scores are minus sixty four percent Christian index, plus thirty five percent authority index, fourteen percent. . ."

"Government?"

She shrugs. "I don't know. It is possible."

A competitor? Or a kindred spirit?

"That's interesting," he mumbles. "Can you calculate projection rating for possible collaboration, with standard copyright loss deductions?"

"It will take a few minutes."

So I have company. Will like poles attract or repel? he wonders. *Should we make contact or release countermeasures?*

She adds: "The agents are not working with any copyright restrictions. No licensing protocol as far as I can tell."

Den raises an eyebrow under his VR glasses. "The plot thickens. Have they made any offers to collaboration?"

"Not yet."

"Any common function points?"

“There is a low probability link with one of the names you added to the list recently: Vascon.”

“Son of a bitch.”

She knows not to respond to this outburst, but her eyes follow his, as her programming dictates.

“Country of origin?”

“Probably Norway or Sweden.”

He observes the scenery as his mind turns over.

“Mary, I want you to create two more agents and let them interact with the group. Remove access barriers from one of the them, and see how it gets infected.”

“Roger dodger.”

He drops out of the VR and calls Kylie.

Apparently he wakes her from an early night. Her broad Scottish sarcasm seems to sound louder than usual.

“It seems as though someone else is researching this. We might have a competitor.”

“Why wouldn’t we? These are ideologies, not just ad campaigns.”

“You’re right,” he agrees.

“It is the duty of thinkers to sell their ideas to the common man. An idea worth having is worth prosecuting in full view of its critics.”

“And we need to build on that. Perhaps we could get some celebrities with out opinions to stand forward make guest appearances within the game, to target individuals.”

“It’s all about fostering the right prejudices.”

“Appealing to peoples’ prejudices. Yes, it’s a powerful springboard.”

She gives up being abrasive and even sounds sympathetic to his concern. Perhaps his male charms have not worn off entirely.

“You know, when I was young my father told me not to blow my nose on toilet paper, because toilet paper was ‘dirty’. A simple association of ideas, transferring what you do with a toilet into something that you use in the process.”

“That’s nice.”

“But true. On another occasion he changed his mind and said toilet paper is actually sterilized. This was a reaction to his fear of germs, but it altered his behaviour completely. Two different perceptions from the same facts.”

“Cortina wants to eliminate these prejudices, by educating people, and have everyone just thinking for themselves, but that is missing the point isn’t it?”

“People like simplifications. It saves them from having to think every single time they do something.” She taps her temple. “Here we are, equipped with the most powerful processing device in the known universe and all most folks want to do is switch it off.”

"That's what our business is trying to do."

"Dennis Morris, think what are you saying. We need to see thinking as a partner of ideology, not as its enemy. Here's another example for you. Homosexuality. People started out believing that homosexuality was wrong because it goes against God. Attitudes change and people figure out that science is the dominant authority, so then suddenly it's against nature, i.e. science. After a while you figure out that nature does what it pleases, not what you want and, after a while, homosexuals actually become cool and exotic. Then you begin to admire the stereotypes, and you start saying things like homosexuals must make the perfect interior designers because they combine a feminine aesthetic with a masculine pragmatism. We're constantly trading one prejudice for another. It doesn't get any better. It doesn't get any more correct. It just gets different. There is a conservation of prejudice. The trick is to make sure that the facts are correct."

"These are the filters by which we view the world," he mutters to himself, as he processes.

"So what are people's fears about education?"

"The fear of failure. Of not being good enough?"

"Is it stronger than the fear of what might happen if you don't learn anything?"

"Hmm. Is education perceived as necessary?"

"People are too comfortable to care about necessities today: they have a safety net. Except for the very poor, and they can't afford an education anyway. I have seen African kids swear to the importance of education in ways that people in the West used to. Now we look at them and say—of course you should get educated, so that you can be like us. But we just don't see that they are already better than that, because they understand that they are ignorant and we don't."

"Whew." Den taps some notes onto his mobile. "So we should remind people of their ignorance? I'm not sure that sounds like a campaign we could sell."

"You need some basic competition in the world, Den." Her Scottish pronunciation kicks into the accents again. "Supply and demand are only a recipe for status quo. That is about regulation. But if you need new ideas, then you need innovation. That requires diversity. It is society's way of searching for good ideas."

"Diversity. But that's the opposite of what we want to make an effective message. We can't just say: do everything! We want to have a simple, strong focused message."

"It's just a whitewash." She grins at him, which doesn't help in the slightest. "Now leave me alone and go to bed."

Once again, he is chasing his tail.

It's not important that we do our job well, he thinks, but it is important that we are seen to be successful. Should the campaign be about us, rather than them? At least we are a singular focus.

He sees little alternative but to consider their own survival first. It is primarily that which will secure their future, their reputation. Now he seems to have come full circle back to his bedroom conversations with Cathy Kim.

Cathy Kim.

Did she tell him the answer? Or was it a red herring?

And why do his thoughts continually come back to Celia?

52

Man meets woman in a local bar, possibly the most beautiful woman he has ever seen. He wants her.

They hit it off and end up back at his place.

"You live here!"

"Yeah."

"Me too! Upstairs."

"That's amazing! You like it?"

"I do. You?"

"Yeah. Except, I have some idiot suing me for having an alarm on my car."

"That idiot is me!"

"What?"

"But. . ."

"You mean we have been writing to each other all this time? Why didn't you just come and talk to me? We could have worked something out!"

"Well, I've never met you. . . I had no idea what you looked like. . ."

53

Dermot is thinking that he would like to give up on the farce. Preeta has not been back for several days after her fling on the town, and he has not been motivated to figure things out without her. Since then he has been hiding himself. Now he has heard from Bishop that she is spending time with this new girl.

Another girl.

He has been holed up in his old office, along with his gaming buddies.

“So you know this one idea they had to change the continent of Africa and North Korea was, like, to kidnap kids,” a voice insists. “You know, like alien abductions.”

“What the hell is the point of that?”

“Then what you do is to give them an education. A Western education. Then you return them to the jungle or wherever, like nothing ever happened.”

“That’s cool.”

“The abductees have experienced a different world and they now know how to think and how to deal with the modern world.”

“You let them be direction agents for change. The idea is that they will be the new generation that breaks with the past.”

“Well, it’s plausible, I suppose.”

“So does this makes us conspiracy nuts or just cynical?”

“Neither. It’s a perfectly legit op’.”

They laugh.

“Op’?”

“Intelligence operation.”

Dermot examines the range of expressions on their faces. It is not always easy to know who is serious and who is joking.

“What about when they wanted to invade all those middle eastern countries?”

“Yeah, then they had to spread this doctrine of war and interventionism, whereas they had been like totally hands off before then.”

“That was when they ruined Star Trek—the most important TV show ever made. Coz, you can’t have a message of peace and optimism getting so popular across the world. So better change all the stories from peace and exploration to shoot up battles, and broken prime directive interventions. Just like the U.S. government. It went from being like a model of what the government could be to an imitation of what it really is. Then the fans killed it.”

“Are you sure?”

“So are you saying it was conscious manipulation that caused the gulf wars or vice versa?”

“I dunno, man. I’m just pissed off about Star Trek.”

Dermot is glad of the company of his colleagues. In one way, they drive him crazy, but at least he understands what they want from him. At least he doesn’t want to have sex with them.

As for this business of Bishop’s, he is glad to get away from it for a while. He is employed to work on gaming related projects, on an hourly basis, but it doesn’t say anything in his contract about hunting down and persecuting anyone for their religious beliefs. What are they? The Ku Klux Klan backwards? Why is he so hung up on religion, anyway? Dermot can agree that abuse of power is a bad thing, but isn’t the church a good thing? If it brings comfort to people who cannot succeed without help, isn’t that as good as any other kind of institution of society?

Bishop has been looking tired and grey lately: lined and dusty, as if he has been cradled and absorbed by some giant moth. It has not seemed like a good time to disturb him. That and the fact that he is avoiding Preeta.

Bishop says that they are trying to make society stable, but Dermot is not sure that he really understands the logic. Stability means that something is sluggish, hard to change, hard to control. Isn’t it change he wants? Too much stability is called stagnation.

And what would it take to de-stabilize it? Rumour or propaganda, call it what you like. These are the weapons of information. Viruses that spread like wildfire. It doesn’t take long to discredit someone. But what are the repercussions?

Dermot is trying to concern himself with other things: things that do not hurt his head.

Even just burying himself in the details of work on the project would be okay, if he didn’t feel so pathetic. But he does. Where did all these imported geniuses come from? What use is he? Now there is a third person involved. Sara. Another girl. He wishes he could face them with cheer and self-confidence, but all he feels is that he is a freak.

Preeta has started to send him messages. Where are you? What are you doing? Now he has received another message from her. He ought to reply, but it is difficult. He’ll do it soon.

The last one says that they are going out to buy clothes: she and the new girl. Does he want to join them and have a make-over? Sounds like a nightmare. What does he know about that anyway? Clothes ought to be just simple to choose and cheap so you can throw them away and get new ones often. And someone should just decide for you what to wear, so you don’t have to spend time and

worry thinking about it. It should be the government's responsibility to decorate the people.

He texts "I can't make it, I have a date." Then he deletes the text and cancels the reply.

He wishes he did have a date. That would be an exaggeration, but he has been working his way to persuade Christina to let him come back and see her. He needs to see her. He wants to touch her. He can almost imagine the grimace of her suspicion. The trouble is that all he can think about is her. He wants to save her, to hold her, to . . . you know.

He read once that no one ever loved anyone for being perfect. You generally end up loving people for their faults. If that is true, then he must be madly consumed by love for Christina.

*

Christmas is approaching and it brings with it a rush of dread for Dermot. It means that he will be alone again; or, more correctly, it means that his aloneness will be on display again. He will be tasked to defend it, by all the self-righteous assholes who think their lives are better than his. And know they are right.

Christmas trees are going up in shop windows and this symbol of good cheers has activated his depression gene, flooding him with useless hormonal misery. I am a mutant, he thinks. This crude symbolic slogan induces sickness in him, not health and cheer.

He has been building up his resolve. There must be some kind of aerobics programme or something that he could join to improve his self-image.

He has been in and looked at the work the others are doing. This new girl is pretty good, for an amateur. The campaign they are supposed to be fighting seems to be accelerating. Most of the available surfaces are now occupied by subliminal advertising. About the only thing they still have control over is the weather.

They are trying to make a succubus by taking an existing agent and modifying it. They are guessing at these things and doing quite well, but they need his help. How could anyone but him see what he sees inside this code? Look at the beauty of the stanzas of precision language! Maybe he is not so useless after all. He feels a bit like a school child who has been asked to comment on the meaning of Keats except that, where such humanities left him only confused and unmoved, these stanzas burst with meaning, both intriguing and logical. He knows this stuff.

*

It is a moody day beyond the glass pane, as though the world has been pulled inside a giant bottle, like those model ships they used to make. The canopy of

the cloud and light seems to press down upon the streets, as if squeezing from it an electricity that lifts the hairs on his neck.

Preeta has finally persuaded him to meet. Alone. He does not want to see the new girl, or the others. Not yet, at least. She places her coffee cup down on the window sill table, and climbs up onto the stool beside him. They sit there looking out onto the town from the window.

"They put the tinsel on the trees all wrong here," Preeta says, looking at the tree across the road and trying to strike up a conversation.

The silver tinsel is hung in radial stripes: spokes emanating from the point of the tree to the base, like go-faster stripes.

"That's the way we do it here," he defends.

"But the tinsel is supposed to look like snow resting on the branches. You're supposed to coil it around the tree."

He looks at her blankly.

She nudges him. "It is supposed to look like a tree, not a nuclear warhead!"

It is cold out in the wintery wonderland. They can sit and do their work in the coffee shop overlooking the shoe store on Grensen: on the edge of Oslo reality. It is hard to work here, with the bustling interruption of the customers, but it is pleasant until someone opens the door and douses them with icicles of frozen air that stab at their bare skin.

The coming of Christmas has always been hard for Dermot. It is the time when society crystallizes into a single shape, a shape into which he cannot fit. The lattice has no space for him in its perfection. It is the ultimate inducement to conformity.

"I can never quite get used to the roads here," she says. "They seem too perfect, too cold."

"They work, more or less."

"Look," she says. "I am sorry about me. I behaved very badly. We might have finished our succubus if I hadn't pushed you away. I am very ashamed."

He shakes his head. "Don't worry about it."

She shakes her head.

"I'm just a bit over sensitive these days. It's not your fault."

"And I can be thoughtless."

He smiles slightly, feeling better.

"So how is the project working out without me?"

"Vibe, the new girl, is very good."

"Vibe?"

"Well, her name is really Sara. I'm not quite sure why she calls herself Vibe."

"What's she like?"

"She's very nice. You'd like her."

That's what I'm afraid of.

"And she is not frightened of anything." She laughs a little nervously. "I think she is quite fearless."

Dermot laughs in his own way. "What about you? "

"Me?"

"You made it here. All this way from Malaysia."

"Oh."

"How could you do that? I mean just cast yourself into the arms of fate like that?"

She shrugs. "I have been doing that all my life. I have always been lucky by it. Not bravery, something else."

Dermot looks at her with pained but genuine admiration. How he wishes that he could be the same.

Preeta says. "Well look. Someone got me fired. But at the same time, someone sent me here."

"Well, I'm glad you're here," he says, surprising himself most of all.

Preeta grins broadly and, seeing his crimson cheeks glow, decides not to let him dwell on his embarrassment. "I've been out with the new girl and her friend quite a lot. I like them."

"Really. What do you do?"

"Mostly drink beer and meet friends. Stay out late."

"Last night? I tried to contact you."

"Mostly, we drank a lot of beer until very late. Then Sara's friend came with even more beer. She said it was for breakfast." She giggles.

They settle down into a quiet pondering, watching the snowflakes fall. Preeta sings, "I'm dreaming of a white. . ."

"Girlfriend," Dermot finishes,

They laugh.

They are not so different, she thinks. What is the difference between fleeing a physical persecution and fleeing a mental persecution from yourself? She actually feels sympathy for him. She is not accustomed to having feelings for anyone at all.

"You know," she says, "I am going to be here for the winter at least. You could invite me for Christmas." She adds: "If you wanted to, of course. . ."

"Don't you want to spend Christmas with your girl?"

She shrugs. "I don't even know her. And besides, perhaps I would like to escape from myself for a week."

He smiles. "All right, I'd like that."

"You are not Christian are you? I mean songs and stuff?"

He laughs. "No, nothing like that."

"Didn't you celebrate Christmas in Malaysia?"

"I was brought up a Muslim."

"Not even secular Christmas?"

"What's that?"

"What most people celebrate."

"I didn't know about it. Or I don't think I did."

"Not even from TV?"

She shrugs.

"You wouldn't have been allowed?"

"I don't know."

"Really."

She looks glumly into her coffee. "The hardest thing to accept sometimes is that you can actually think for yourself. We are taught to believe what people tell us. We are encouraged not to ask too many questions."

"For the sake of efficiency it is best not to question everything all of the time"

"Even when I was paid to think, I was not expected to think for myself. My boss thought of me just a stupid slave."

"So you left?"

"So I . . . branched out."

"That's what you get for underestimating people."

"Well, the reality is that I was sacked for my thinking."

"Sacked?"

"He couldn't lose face. My boss. You know, in India we have castes. We don't talk about it much, but everyone understands it."

"Perhaps you should."

"The ruling class believes that the lower castes are . . . beneath them. There is not just upper class and lower class in India – there is a whole spectrum of prejudice."

He shrugs barely with his lips. "I'm sorry."

"I will not say that society could do without classes but I will say that lower class does not mean worthless or stupid. I was the one who solve the problems," she says, suppressing anger.

He nods.

"Perhaps it is not something you have experienced directly."

He shakes his head, uncertainly. Generally he is good enough at punishing himself.

"It is reason enough to run away."

"Don't you feel much like a slave here too? I mean, is it so much better here?"

"Here it is different," she thinks aloud. "I am treated like an equal, even though I am expected to do a job." She smiles. "Besides, you don't work very hard here. For me, it is like a holiday."

Dermot grins and hides it in his mocha latte. She might be right about some of the family people, but she obviously hasn't seen the guys at SmartMob Gaming and Hosting.

"I've been working quite a bit lately, but not on the right things," he admits.

"Does that mean you are going to come and help us finish our succubus?"

"I suppose I should."

"You don't want to miss it. It is actually a lot of fun since the new girl came. She makes a nice atmosphere."

Change the subject.

"When you first came here, you said there was a problem with the game that might work to our advantage. At least, that's how I heard you."

"Yes. I said that. There are problems."

"What kind of problems?"

"Well the visible symptoms are things like broken billboards and sims going wrong. There are bugs in the system. I realized that much before I came here."

"Yes, I've seen that."

"But that's not the problem. It's just what we see."

"So what is the problem?"

"Well, I don't know. My guess is that there are too many human interests in the simulations. Money, power, propaganda – you know, it's all going on. Big companies are playing the game like a new marketplace. Smart buffering can filter out advertising from video, but not from the game, so the game represents a new channel for selling things. That much is obvious."

"So is there a problem with the advertising?"

"Well, yes and no. I think it is the outsourcing of the game coding that has led to the problems we are seeing with rendering."

"What do you mean?"

"The game is too ambitious for any one company or organization. They have split up the development into partnerships, with a set of rules and regulations in the contracts."

Getting a message through to someone when you want to is not as straightforward as it could be, he knows, from personal experience. But it helps at least to have a rule book, so you know what game you're playing. He wishes he had one for his personal life.

"Yeah – we're one of them."

"Ruling class, working class."

"Well, and a bit of anarchy. . ."

"It's too big."

"For users?"

"For the planet."

Dermot laughs but cuts it short when he sees her reaction. "Sorry. I don't understand what you mean."

"They have tried to cope with the demand by outsourcing to slave companies."

"Yes. Like us."

"The errors are occurring because of the sourcing companies are just following the rule book. But there is an error or an omission in the book. They haven't considered the effect of conflicts between the billboards and the avatar simulations. There are segmentation problems that I have seen in the code during testing."

Dermot shrugs. "Bane of the programmer. Segmentation."

"But by having so many people working on the same thing, without any reasonable protections, there are collisions and contentions."

He nods. "I've noticed some of that, it's a pretty simplistic interface."

"That's why people trust it, but trust doesn't imply reliability. Well, that's only one problem. The game has built in load balancing, right?"

He nods.

"It moves the different characters from machine to machine. That's how they can run it all on cheap PC hardware and spread it around the world and capture third world markets."

"Of course," he says impatiently. Does she think he's stupid now?

"But even with the load balancing the expected throughput is now too high."

He waits for the conclusion.

"Not for the system, but for the users. There is a limit to how much information humans can absorb. They are already at the maximum theoretical limit for human perception. If you anything bigger, it just starts to get worse."

"How do you know what the limit is?"

"I was reading a research paper from somewhere in Japan. They have a lot of experience of this."

He is giving her a look.

"I read sometimes, okay? I want to go back to college when I can afford to."

"Okay," he says. *What did I say?*

"I was reading some of the references that are in the deep documentation for the game manuals. It seemed like a natural thing to do to figure out this problem, so that our company could make a good impression."

"You think there are too many messages in the game."

"The density is most likely too high. Even programmers and testers are being affected. I saw things in Malaysia that you probably do not have access to. When they send the job to us, they don't expect us to understand anything, but what they don't realize that we do our jobs well."

"So?"

“Something has not been going right. There are rooms in the VR where odd stuff has been going on. Some of the controlling avatars have been altered and the program seems to be stabilizing around a configuration that is not what we were asked to deliver.”

“I think that the process surrounding the program and all of its integrated pieces has somehow reached the point where it is working against itself. The game rules are about persuasion and I think that, in testing this game, the persuasion has fed back—persuaded some of the programmers in your team to alter the avatars.”

Dermot’s eyes widen. What a seriously cool idea. A program that re-programs its programmer. Could it be possible? There is something in what she is saying. That is reason of itself to go back and help them work on this.

“I am not saying that this is a simple or direct action. It is subtle. It has layers of complexity. It cannot be just a simple thing. It is more like a popular movement that has been started.”

“Did you report it to the bug centre?”

“The requests got rejected every time I tried to initiate contact.”

I know that feeling, Dermot thinks, thinking of his attempts to contact Christina..

“It’s a trust problem. Actually it is easier to wait until the other party comes to you. That way it is easier for them to trust the connection.”

Dermot considers the idea, still thinking of Christina. There is something to it.

“We still need to work on this campaign. We can’t do anything about the billboards, but we have normal game channels. The new girl said we have to make people reevaluate their priorities, distract them. If there is one dominant signal, make another one to compete with it. Make the second one look like the first, so that people can’t tell the difference. That makes the odds fifty-fifty for success.”

“Ehm. Look, I need to go and make a call. See someone.”

She nods. Obviously there’s something going on with Dermot. She should let him sort it out and she has a feeling that she cannot help.

No need to tell the others yet.

She recognizes the need to protect the weak.

*

When Dermot arrives at her flat, Christina is sitting at her combo looking at its screen rather than using the glasses.

She smiles broadly as he enters, but does not get up. “Did you get it?”

He holds his bag up as if to show her the replacement module.

“Sorry, it’s a mess,” she says, as though it were somehow an unusual state of affairs.

Dermot shrugs. He doesn't care. His eyes scan her long, skinny legs under a grey trouser fabric. She has her legs crossed in front of the screen. It accentuates her slight curves and makes her tiny breasts look larger.

"I was just looking at some pictures. Take a look," she says. She pops into a history folder and starts bringing up pictures of naked girls. The pictures are not slutty, but tasteful pictures obviously taken by a professional, with nice lighting and quality poses.

"I think she is really pretty," Christina says. "Nice breasts. Not too big, not too small."

Dermot is a little surprised by this, but he has come to be less shocked than curious about her behaviour. He crouches down beside her, glad to be missing a chair because it means that he is closer to her body. He supports himself by putting his hand on the chair, so that it is just touching her thigh. He can smell her soapy clean body under the clothes and feels himself respond.

"Some of them are pretty wild. There's a picture here that has two of the girls licking each other."

He looks at the picture and it is nice, but he is more concerned with the proximity of her arm. He desperately wants to put his hand on her leg and run it up her body and then kiss her and. . .she knows that he is aroused. He knows that she knows, but when he looks for the faintest sign of an invitation he finds nothing in her frozen features.

"Just look that," she adds.

He sighs quietly. "They are pretty hot," he says, not quite sure what he should say.

"I didn't show it to you to get you horny," she says irritably and gets up to walk into the kitchen. He hears her switch on the kettle.

Has he failed her test now? Or passed it? What does she want anyway? He perches himself on the chair that she was sitting in a moment ago and opens his bag, pulling out the module. It is a trivial operation to take out the old one and put the new one in, but he wants to make the most of her gratitude. He waits until she is looking at him, probably thinking what a loser he is for not making a move, then twists the combo around to get at the module.

As he is working, she flips through channels on the TV. He searches desperately for some topic of conversation, but there is nothing there. Finally, she says, "How much do I owe you?"

He receives the blow quietly. "Oh, don't worry about it. This was lying around at work. No one wants it anyway. "

Unpredictably, she smiles. "Cool." She looks at him kindly for a moment and disappears back into the kitchen where he hears her making tea. Then she re-emerges in a moment with two not-so-clean looking mugs of hot tea. She sits down on the sofa again and makes room for him with a subtle gesture. Clearly

he is expected to join her there; perhaps she is willing to try again to get him to make his move. If that is what she really wants. If he is not misreading the signs.

He sits down beside her, just centimetres away from her slight frame. God look at her, he thinks. Such physical beauty, but such a blank and sour expression. What is the matter with Norway, he thinks. Catch the eye of a beautiful woman and instead of taking it as a compliment it is: 'what are you looking at, ass-hole?' He is not sure whether women are ashamed of themselves, or perhaps embarrassed by real interest. The only time he has seen someone responding to attention is after half a bottle of spirits. Is it: don't fuck with me, because I am nothing and I am already really pissed off about that!? Or is it: don't look at me because you are nothing and I am not willing to put my judgement on hold until I can no longer take responsibility for my actions and literally anyone will do?

Dermot feels suddenly depressed, wondering why he has come here at all. Clearly he is not getting anywhere. She is not interested in him, but she has some magnetic quality. He has fallen into a trap; the madness has struck him down again. There is something about her that is vulnerable and tender, that makes him want to stay and look after her. But he knows enough to know that there is nothing here that he can possibly look forward to.

They are sitting tight, but he cannot bring himself to go one step further. What the hell is it she wants? He looks down at her legs from the corner of his eye and wishes that he could make love to her tenderly.

"I got my injection today," she says.

"Injection?"

"Contraceptive. I hate pills. And condoms. You spend so much time fiddling with them that you lose the moment."

He prepares himself for a beating. "I thought you weren't interested in sex?" he reminds her.

She shrugs and avoids the question. "I might want to try it."

Is she flirting with me, he wonders. This is so typical her. She does not look at him or give any sign of being interested and yet she presents him now with this revelation as though he is supposed to know what it signifies.

"You know, after I had my kid I wanted to know what it would be like to have sex – you know, whether I would be able to feel anything, or if it would be any different from before. So I went out to a place where I used to hang out and play pool to see if I could pick someone up. And I kept hanging around this guy. He wasn't interested in me at all. We were playing pool and stuff and all of his friends thought I was some kind of loser."

Dermot listens but can hardly believe his ears.

She continues. "In the end it was just the two of us and he still wasn't interested but I wouldn't leave him alone. So we come back here really late and he is really tired and really drunk. And we start doing it. And he is really rough,

shagging me really hard. And he couldn't come. It took him ages. I thought he would never stop. I was just lying there wishing he would be finished. The day after I could hardly walk. In the end he just pulled up his pants and left. He didn't even say anything."

Dermot's feels panic rising throughout the story – he feels physically sick. His heart is pounding and he feels adrenalin surging through him. He is crushed. There is an instinct within him that ignites a pressing urge to flee. He dares a look at her and sees that she is suppressing that fact she was hurt. But her face is the same stoney statue of perfection, devoid of feeling.

How can girls who are so fragile invite such danger? his mind protests. He imagines of her under some utterly drunken, violent low-life and it makes him physically nauseous.

He tries to pull himself together. Wouldn't he do the same thing if he got the chance? Would he? Well, not like that .. or? It really is not the same for a girl to sleep around as it is for a guy. Girls have to submit to the unknown – to potential danger. They are more helpless in sex than men. It is nothing to do with disease. It is the threat of abuse, of physical danger. The idea of being able to feel safe opening yourself to someone is not something that Dermot can understand.

And even psychologically – men are just spreading something around, disseminating, but a woman with several partners is collecting something, collating. It is different, whatever it means.

He would like to think that men were not chauvinistic pigs as per the rumours, but he cannot genuinely say that it is not true. It is his reluctant estimation that most males are really self-serving, callous bastards who use girls without any regard for their feelings. But why do women allow it? Even seek it out?

He is shell shocked. He does not know what to say. Suddenly she jumps up and goes to the shelf by the combo. "Look what I have left." She picks up a bottle of Scottish whisky. "You want a glass? We can celebrate you fixing my combo." She is suddenly light hearted now. Dermot simply feels grateful for the offer of a swig of something this will calm his nerves. She fills two small glasses and pushes one into his hand. "Here. Skål!"

They drink.

She flips channels again and finds a movie that looks okay. It is clear that she does not want him to go, but has given up any thought of sex. He, for his part, does not feel in a fit state to leave. He is drawn to her, even though he knows that she will cause him enormous grief. So they sit and watch the movie, drinking whisky. As he is drawn into the fantasy of the film, he is gradually released from his earthly anxiety, still wondering what the hell it is that she wants.

The combination of movie and whisky has a soporific effect. Dermot even ignores the incoming alerts on his mobile wrist strap. After the stress of the day it was pure masochism to come here and expose himself to this heart wrenching.

If he were half as smart as his job description he would have realized what was going on here and found himself a safer object of desire. Yet as they sit here together, watching the movie they seem comfortable together. He feels as though they have something, as though they are already a couple. Part of him knows that he is a fool, but his primitive brain cannot help it. He is ensnared.

The movie ends some time later, and his backside is going to sleep. Time to slip away. She is asleep now, teasing him with her defencelessness. Lying this close to her, she looks so calm so beautiful. No muscle tone in her soft face. He wants so badly to reach out and take advantage of the situation, while she is helpless, but then he would be everything he despises in others. And he knows that the only reason he is here at all is that she knows he won't.

*

"Wait a minute," he says. "Why are we so stupid?"

"What?"

"Don't you see? Christmas is something that still pushes people's buttons. It sends them running back to their families to dance around stupid trees and shit. Maybe that is what we can use to recrystallize the larger groups."

"You mean the traditional message of Christmas cheer, lots of love Santa Claus."

"Like Scrooge," he thinks aloud and laughs.

Sometimes it's just staring you in the face.

"All right. So what is the best thing about Christmas," she asks him.

Dermot has to think hard. "Mince pies," he says and adds: "Have you ever been to England?"

"You mean steak and kidney pies?"

"No. Mince pies, but not meat. I mean it's a fruit mixture called mincemeat. I don't know why really. It's all kinds of leftovers of fruit mixed up and left to ferment. The result is amazing. Mince pies."

"All right, so how do we send the message of Christmas into the game?"

He grins happily. "We make it snow."

54

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55

The bar is more or less empty, and Joe has forsaken his new jeans for a pair of beige slacks and a brown shirt, under his anorak. Back to old habits. Chocolate colours and clichéd styles. Today, Joe looks like a Christian missionary. What happened to Africa's burgeoning fashion industry?

"You know the latest? The American group has bought our youth organization. It's going to be taken over by the Methodist church of Atlanta."

"Nice."

"I have to go and meet them."

"That's why you're looking so stylish today."

Joe grunts as he sips at his beer. "And something else."

Jonas raises an eyebrow.

"We were raided by police yesterday."

"Really? What happened?"

"Terror alert."

"Terror alert? Muslims?"

He shakes his head. "Christians. They've been buying just about everything that plugs straight into the psyche. Then they can stick their corporate logo onto it and claim the authority of Jesus Christ."

"Jesus Christ," Jonas agrees and gulps his beer.

It feels good to be hiding out with Joe in this bar. The past couple of weeks has been intense to the point of exhaustion. Jonas' lack of self-control has made the issue of the diversion of research funds into a national news item. Some even think that international news agencies have taken an interest in the story. The furore has been building and he is becoming inundated with requests for interviews and comments. Perhaps this was not strictly what he intended, but it bears a certain moral justice.

"You know, it got me thinking. The policeman who coordinated the arrest when you were being followed. He said something about these vigilante groups originating in youth groups and centres. Kids of around eighteen who are looking for their purpose in the world. I started asking questions around some of the kids who spend a lot of time on the net."

"And?"

"I don't know. Some of them might even come from our group."

"Don't you wish you had that research money now?"

Jonas drinks a slug of beer and looks around the bar. He likes to see the art and the rows of bottles on the shelves, even if he never tastes any of it. Old beery habits die hard. A few more people in the bar wouldn't hurt, as long as they were there to shield them from attention rather than to demand their piece. None of the regular fixtures are here.

"Radical Islam or Christianity. The return to tribalism," he philosophizes. "Kids who are eighteen or nineteen, trying to understand the world. Angry and disowned. Whether they come from the foothills of Kashmir or Setesdal, they are all ruled with an iron fist by elders who maintain the tribal traditions."

"There are people out there just waiting to prey on kids of that age. You find people spreading out leaflets at Mosques and churches. Even at our group. I haven't noticed it much fortunately, but I'm sure it goes on. They are careful that their spreading programs don't target people like me who could put a stop to it."

"These are dangerous times." There is a certain exhaustion in his voice.

Joe continues. "The Evangelical Christians are tribalizing the south of the U.S. like an industry now, and even here in parts of Scandinavia. They are isolating themselves from the wider law, dealing with problems internally and ignoring the criminals within their midst. People are in denial. Europe is becoming Africa, as Africa tries to become Europe."

Jonas laughs. "Africa? I never thought of it that way."

Joe shrugs. "Sure, why not. The problem in Africa has always been that people will not rise to the challenge of helping each other out of poverty. They

think small. They don't trust government. Government has been the enemy for so long, so tribalism persists. If you don't have a sense of wider civic duty, how can you create a civil society? Basic services, impartial administration. . ."

Good to see Joe has not forgotten his intellectual heritage in working with these kids, Jonas thinks. Youth centres need people like him with a smarter version of reality than they normally offer. If people can just get past figuring out which gang to belong to, it might be possible to save society from the breakup it is experiencing.

"Are you going to stay on at the youth centre?"

"Not sure I can."

"They want to get rid of you?"

"No. They want me to stay, but I can't swallow this new style of leadership. At the same time, I don't want to abandon the kids."

"What do they have in mind for it?"

"More like a church community with prayer meetings and preaching."

"I suppose that's what they do."

"Missionaries do not have to spread their doctrine as part of their work. We have always tried to keep that part of the church out of the centres. We want people to think for themselves. Most of them are there precisely because others have been doing their thinking for them, in the first place."

"It's your French education showing through."

"Liberté, égalité, fraternité? It's not politics either."

"You know what they say. Religious leaders, are just politicians in dresses."

"They say that?"

"Apparently."

"It doesn't have much to do with the spirit anymore. People don't think that God is listening, maybe."

"Cause God never got himself a mobile. . ."

"Don't laugh, Jonas."

"I'm not laughing. I am saying it is what you can expect if you place all your hope in someone else. People have to take responsibility for themselves. It's just no good to palm off the responsibility on someone else or something else."

"That's why we're here, getting drunk?"

"That's why we're here, getting drunk."

"Too many people, just falling apart. You can see them one moment working well in some niche of society, getting along, playing their role. Then something changes and they cannot adapt."

We don't make kids that can adapt any more. They are too protected, too factory moulded. They learn one thing – just one thing and when they are no longer needed, they get thrown on the garbage pile. A pile of wasted humanity, sustained with pain and reality killers.

Jonas drinks from his own glass.

“You know, I’ve seen kids *age* from twenty-seven to forty-something in just a year. Youth vanishes in an instant. I’ve seen it many times. The girls get thin and starve, then they get help and they get fat and red, with high blood pressure. Skin creases and bulges. They end up at the centres. Lost, helpless. We try to remind them about how to live in a society, except it’s not a society this thing you have here. It’s a machine now. And if you don’t fit in, you are just replaced by a new part, not repaired. People are just components to be replaced here.”

Good intentions fraught . . .

Joe studies his distant expression. “Do you think I am too weak? Do you think that I should just pick up and move on – go somewhere else and start again? Or should I stay and fight, like you?” He points to a newspaper. “They are advertising that now. Kids call it rebooting. You do a reset on your life. Move somewhere, start again.”

“Why run away?”

“Is it running away? Or is it seeking adventure?”

“If you need to ask I think you know the answer.”

Joseph regards him with his powerful black features and penetrating eyes. “Jonas, look at all you have done. You have achieved far more than I ever have. Every time I look at you, something has changed. You have achieved something and that is good.”

Jonas laughs. “What have I done?”

“Your research. Knowledge, learning.”

“No. . . I think that’s has all collapsed.”

“You have something to show for your work. A legacy.”

“What use is it now? The politics of the day are saying that knowledge and research are pointless.”

“People always try to take advantage and knock you down.”

“This is the story of the Tower of Bullshit? And all the men did perish? No, I am not trying to build anything. I am a plumber, Joe. I spend most of my time fixing things. But I would love to build something again.”

“So would I.” Joseph reaches into his back pocket and pulls out a chain. Hanging on the chain is a small figure made of wood. “Look. I wanted to give you something.”

“Give me something?”

“I got this when I was a child. I kept it because I thought it was a powerful image.” he says. “Now I would like you to have it.”

“Me? But why? Don’t you want to keep it?”

“For a heathen, you are one of the most spiritual people I know, Jonas. I would like you to have it.” He dismisses Jonas’ sceptical expression. “Don’t worry, it is not a Christian thing. It’s from the old religions of the west of Africa.

Did you know that the banks of the Niger were one of the few civilizations of the world that were not hierarchically organized? No pyramid of power. Just distributed cooperation of small groups.”

“I . . . eh. . . did know, yes. That’s very kind of you . . . but what have I done to deserve a gift? And such a precious one?”

“Just a little ju-ju between friends.”

He smiles and stares at the piece to conceal his embarrassment. How does one receive such a gift?

Graciously, of course.

He shakes Joe’s hand and thanks him again, certain that he does not deserve any such gift. As an academic he has been persuaded to abandon the pursuit of knowledge to decide on funding policy. He has betrayed his roots. Even as a human being, he is far from angelic in his attitudes or accomplishments. Kaja would laugh at him now if she knew of this exchange. If he is so great, what is he doing hiding out here in a brown bar in the middle of the city, looking for cardiovascular relief in a glass of beer, instead of standing up to the hawks of government?

Jonas looks down the long bar to where the old drunk usually hangs onto the woodwork, not talking to anyone, just downing his beer. He is not there today, not yet. Then a thought strikes him.

Has Joe lost his faith?

Jonas’ eyes look deeply into his dark friend’s face, as if searching for the meaning of this development. Joe seems to be happy staring into his beer for a moment, and Jonas feels suddenly tired and worn.

It reminds him of something. His life seems to roll past him, as if on film and he sees something that he should have seen a long time ago. He stares back at the space on the end of the bar, where the old drunk usually hangs out. Where is that loser? Where is that sad old fuck who comes here to avoid company and drown his sorrows?

It’s me, he thinks. I am that sad old fuck.

Just give me a beer and let me stagger home alone.

Where did it go wrong?

It is possible to do everything right and still fail?

It’s you, idiot.

He sees himself staring back from the mirror.

*

Kaja’s mother calls and asks him to be more helpful. His son needs him. What do these people want from him? They profess to care but all they do is demand his attention. They give him nothing in return, not even understanding. So why do they hold on to him? Why won’t they simply let him go?

Punishment at the hands of our loved ones, Jonas thinks.

We are their chance to let down their barriers and let the flood gates roar. An understanding ear becomes a garbage chute for relief. No doubt he is partially to blame, but what is it that makes them perceive each issue as a conflict, with points to be won?

He can hear her voice even now. "You're so goddamn selfish, Jonas. You buy me a gift, but you don't get me anything I want. You buy something that you think I should have. Have you never thought if my feelings? All you can see is your own precious life."

"And you see more?"

"Oh, so now it's my fault? That's typical!"

She will spend half the day just stewing in hormones, not getting anywhere, just feeling confused and lost. There's not a chance of rational thought.

"Evenly happy for the rest of your life? How is that possible?"

"Do we really need these extremes?"

Then his secretary calls. "It's the girl I mentioned. She is still trying to get to you. You should really take one of her calls, just to give her some satisfaction."

"I know. I should."

Sara is not to blame for this mess; she is still trying to reconcile the changes that have taken place in such a short space of time with what she thought was the plan for her future. Suddenly one finds oneself on a completely different road, headed for the unknown. He knows all about that.

I ought to call Sara, he thinks. *I ought to call Kaja*,

He has been disinclined to call and discover who she is seeing at this moment in time. That and all of the chaos of the past weeks seems to have disabled his sense of responsibility towards his patchy family.

We hurt the people we love. Why can't we just resist the temptation to strike out?

Obviously because there are no barriers. The threshold for venting senseless frustrations is too low. Everyone needs a valve, but that is no excuse for blasting our nearest and dearest with bad-tempered steam.

Marriage was a release from all that, of course. It transformed the hard creativity of romancing into a simple contract of obligations. Like the law itself: just an excuse to stop thinking about how to behave well. Just follow the contract and you will be a good person. But it didn't last either.

Well, he is not convinced. You cannot buy your future in a box, with a money back guarantee. When you put a dog on a leash it is not generally for its own good.

Joe has lost his faith.

The revelation is like a lightning bolt from the Lord himself. Is the whole world falling apart? Joe seems to be clinging on to the idea of it, but he has

already lost the battle? And the clothes—is that where the jeans come from? Perhaps he cannot wear the fake garb of a would-be priest any more. He will not say it, and Jonas can not ask him, but somehow they both understand it.

Yes that's it.

Jonas can see it. Joseph is too smart, too rational to be a religious man. His faith has been shaken. He has asked the forbidden questions. But, for now, he is trying to continue with his duties.

You can always live a lie, for the sake of appearances, he thinks.

Maybe that is actually his easiest path through life?

*

Kaja calls and asks for a truce. They have not spoken for some days. He leaves a message.

*

The man, the bureaucrat, has arrived. He swaggers around his department like the town bully. The ministry has sent him to make sure that their plan is enforced.

His mandate is like my croissant, Jonas thinks Layer upon layer of paper thin deception, rolled up and blown up on an empty core of hot air.

If only there were some administrative coffee one could use to wash it all down.

There is no point in my even being here? It is a farce.

Presumably they gave him this job to emasculate him. Vociferous researcher: too smart for his own good, rein him in, neutralize by promotion within the ranks? Control and regulate. The more they steam towards nominal de-regulation, the more rules they implement to 'guide' its progress.

What remains of his scientific mind knows that it is useless of them to try, and useless of himself to protest. You can't cage something that wild and still expect it to live. It's like putting a rare animal in a zoo, or plucking and pressing a beautiful flower to have it. Life withers and dies in captivity. The more you try to control it, the less of it is real. At the same time, you cannot argue with denial.

Now, they are ready just to punish someone who has disobeyed government policy for the good of the people. So, does all this protestation make him a terrorist? A revolutionary? Robin Hood?

Jonas is right about his decision to oppose them: of that he is certain, but they have puppies and kittens on their side. How can you argue against a humanitarian cause and still use words like 'ethics'? Every conscientious person, with respect for themselves, knows that you are supposed to preserve life in desperate circumstances. How could one not spend money on the African famine? How

could selfish and elitist research be of any use to mankind when there are people suffering?

Apparently, preservation does not extend to investing in the survival of our whole way of life: our future.

We have become fire-fighters, and charity is a bucket of cold water in a growing conflagration of politics.

The sanguine bully that the ministry has sent to coerce him is regrettably pleasant in his administration of their medicine, sporting joviality and an array of blunt administrative instruments in his cause. Jonas does not want to force a dislike of everything he represents onto its animated cadaver, but he finds himself projecting more animosity than restraint. The man pretends to be their friend, but the charade wears pretty thin.

"It is such a pleasure to finally meet you."

I am about to hurt you.

"As you know, some new rules have come into force."

I just cut off your head.

Jonas has the sick feeling of being railroaded by a cattle herder with no ethical or moral manifesto. His interest is purely in moving up the food chain, by shifting the economic game pieces around the board so that government ministries can feel good about their half-assed pledges to the media.

"We all need a little breathing room from this reallocation. A little slack in the rope, so it doesn't strangle us," Jonas tells him, as nicely as he can. "It is wrong of the ministry to make this decision that will kill off Norwegian research."

"It's a shame," he agrees. "But it is what has been decided."

It's a sham, you mean.

He is just following orders.

Soldier, ask not.

Jonas recalls Ed Bishop's comment about democracy: people have to go along with the decisions once they have been made. Does that mean he being undemocratic in this behaviour? Let's face it, no one was asked to vote on this decision. It was a unilateral action. The government is betraying its people with its indolent and supine acceptance of commands that don't even come from an agent of any country or people. This is direct pressure from American, Christian lobbies. They represent neither U.S. nor Norwegian policy. We ought to be viewing this travesty as an infiltration of national security, not as a directive to be accepted with nauseous servility.

Douse us in cheap guilt and change our whole economic strategy. Are we so push-over?

Jonas has still not come to terms with losing Sara. And losing her to the police of all things. Since when did the forces of creative anarchy transfer to become part of the sentinels of establishment? At least she has a home for the

time being, and income. She is a smart kid, but he needs to feel that he has done more to protect her from what is going on.

All our futures lie in the hands of people like her.

So he returns to the business of making his conscience feel better. He fends interviews with journalists who have caught wind of the scandal he has leaked. Now his minder is there to keep him in check.

“Of course, we are deeply committed to solving this problem.”

After the day’s interviews, Jonas feels spent and hollow. Reiterating his own message so many times, he is not even sure that he believes it himself anymore. His scientific training makes him suspicious of any ‘truth’ that trips off the tongue. He pulls one of the journalists to one side.

“In reality, we are not free to make these decisions. The ministry has put both sides in shackles. I can try to resist those forces and they can try to push them, but there has to be a point of balance in the middle. Luckily, their own system is preventing such a rapid change from taking place. You cannot force the bureaucratic leviathan you have created to be flexible when it suits your needs.”

“Would you agree that corruption is so ingrained into the daily lives of government that they really cannot see anything wrong with what they are doing?”

“Only in an academic sense. Any hierarchy of command is, by definition, corrupt and self-serving, but let’s not exaggerate.”

Now he has received a number of calls and threats from officious persons at the ministry, suggesting that he could be arrested for treasonous behaviour if he continues. He wonders if they could they set the crime team onto him now, with his new friends at Interpol?

He finds himself becoming impatient with the process, approaching a point at which he must decide whether or not to allow himself to become angry, or whether to suppress the urge and maintain his equanimity.

He has disturbed a lot of people today, including himself.

When he returns the next day, there is a memo from the chief administrator. *Mr. Lindgren, due to new construction renovation, we find that we are in need of your office to store the necessary building materials. We hope this does not inconvenience you significantly.*

This is how they humiliate someone in government service.

*

Christmas is approaching, hark the herald angels advertise.

Jonas walks along Karl Johan, admiring the prosperity of the retailers and their wares. It is good to see the world working, the wheels of fortune grinding on their investments. It is good, even to see so many people out of their homes, simply walking around. The power of Christmas is still strong. Some things never die.

Designer drum beats pump out their own wares onto the shopping street, warming the twilight chill with musical toddy. The rhythms seep involuntarily into his psyche, defying his own reticence and teasing him to dance, as he has never actually been able to do in his entire life. The producers are good; they know their trade. But he wonders how much it costs kids to play it.

Oh come, all ye faithful, and subscribe to our streamed hypnosis. It's not as expensive as you think. And the sacrament of copyright law will commit you to oblivious financial servitude for your incidental pleasure.

Just thirty years ago, it was possible to buy recorded music and be done with. Now everything is licensed by the hour.

A woman approaches who reminds him of Kaja, but knows immediately that it could not be her. This woman walks at a calculated pace, on designer shoes that cry out exhibitionism, prying distance between herself and the waves of pedestrians that shuffle about her. That is not Kaja. He has been trying to reach her for a whole day, but she has not been answering him. The tables have turned.

Jonas browses the shop windows, looking at the electrical goods for inspiration. They are all foreign, even now. If he were allowed to do his job, some of these could be Norwegian. If he could only convince government to reform their attitudes to risk and investment. If the country is to survive the next generation with declining oil revenues, it will have to innovate, not merely import, even if it means manufacturing. But the country is barely trained for it. Education is little more than attitude engineering and button pushing now. The house-of-cards economy is still buoyed by fossil fuels and fossilized ideas. Sooner rather than later that wealth must expire and be replaced by something more permanent. His job is about securing that permanency, if only they could see it.

A gang of teenage boys comes along the street, wearing red and silver tinsel like football scarves. Did they bother going to school today? A couple of police on horseback are clopping along behind them, at a discrete distance. The sight of uniforms take his mind back to Sara.

He has walked more or less all the way around the shops now, as the daylight has faded. With the long nights moving in, he feels tempted to simply go home and sleep, but it is only four o'clock. He should work some more. If he goes home, it would become a self-fulfilling prophesy.

Jonas backtracks and goes into a little shop to buy coffee. Simple pleasures are what carries you through the hard times. Besides, the shop is unusually quiet, which suits him perfectly.

He chooses the appropriate blend of beans and asks for them to be ground. The lighting inside the shop makes it look even darker outside now. The bluish hue of evening is descending rapidly. He gives his card to the young boy behind the counter and waits for him to deal with the transaction.

Then, through the window, even through the reflections, he sees her across

the street. It is Kaja.

She emerges from a side alley between two shops, smiling and laughing. Behind her is a man he does not know. His head is thrown back joyfully. The man is some years older than she. Jonas is suddenly impatient to complete his purchase and see where she is going.

He feels a stab of something undefinable, something like betrayal but more violent. Is it jealousy or anger? What does it matter? His every muscle pulls taut with a surging scream and he begins to shake with the adrenalin rush. Of course she would not answer him if she had spent the entire night and day with a new lover. How could he have been such a fool?

When he emerges clumsily from the shop, she is already far down the street. He begins to run after her, not wanting to be seen, but not wanting to lose sight of her either.

Are they lovers? They must be! He is not an attractive man, but then Jonas has never understood what turns women on. The thought of her in bed with him burns like an ice-water flooding into his lower body.

He follows them for some distance, back to her apartment feeling a mixture of guilt for his intrusive voyeurism and anger at her callous mind games.

She clasps the man as though they are about to part company. But then they pause. Some new possibility seems to have emerged between them. He follows her inside.

This is so like her, he thinks. And what a fool is he, who falls for her promises and assurances every time? He has been proven the fool time and time again. What possession drives him to prevaricate in ending this charade?

It could be true that people need change about every ten years. The timer starts ticking and we either we change or we enter into an emotional crisis. Those who marry at twenty learn it when they are thirty; those who change jobs when they are thirty learn when they are forty. . . . What hope is left except to accept stagnation? To make peace with endings?

Their end was like a fabled nightmare: telephone calls that she would ignore in his presence and then find an excuse to return later; visits from 'old friends' and ex-boyfriends; her increasing lack of interest in him. Finally the signs could not be ignored and his fears consumed him in a rain of presumed truths, like a stoning from the inquisition.

In the chill, it begins to snow.

*

Jonas crawls back to the offices the next day, still feeling like a wounded animal. He has not spoken to anyone. He escaped the evening by throwing off his shoes and settling down with a glass of fine Madeira and Honegger's grave symphonic rumblings.

More snow is forecast today. That pleases him. Somehow, the snow seems to light up the city with optimism. There is still something in that peace and goodwill to all men nonsense, when it snows. Such a pity that it melts so quickly in the city.

He nears the site of the neighbouring demolition that has been taken over for parking spaces, and hears the protracted complaint of a motorist getting closer. The man is trying to enter the parking area, but the security guard is explaining some kind of problem.

“My parking space is taken.”

“Sorry sir, there is no reserved parking today.”

“But I work here. How am I, are we supposed to. . .”

“Sorry, sir. You cannot park your car in its reserved spot today, we are expecting visitors from the ministry. They have reserved these spaces.”

“I wasn’t told.”

“You can park in the unmarked spaces over there.”

“But how are we going to find our vehicles again?”

“Just move along, sir. We don’t have time to discuss this now.”

So the ministry is screwing with everyone’s heads today. Somehow seeing someone else’s meaninglessly stunted predicament helps his own spirits. He refuses to believe that the point of authority is to reduce ordinary people to powerless ignominy, but sometimes it is a hard theory to refute.

Of course, when it snows later, you won’t be able to find the cars again, he thinks to the guard as he walks past him. The guard stares through him to make it clear that he is no one.

Jonas arrives at the research council offices and walks unwillingly down the corridor to the day’s ritual humiliations. He would rather transport himself away from here to help Sara, or finish his business with Kaja, but he wills himself forward with cheerless effort. He has no usable office to attend, but he can make use of the other facilities the building offers.

Things are moving in the research debate. Well, he wasn’t going to stand still and be steam-rollered by a minor minister, at least not without a fight. His new spiritual low incites him to make the matter international now. When one of the richest nations faults on its responsibilities to its poorer neighbours, the matter goes beyond local politics. Today, he feels like stabbing back.

Almost as soon as he has posted a commentary to a research magazine editorial, his combo signals an unusual call invitation. At about the same time, he receives a text from Joe, saying that he should expect a call.

He pushes aside some of the boxes from his desk, to make room to sit down. The call is from Spain. Spain? He rummages around for some glasses and accepts the invitation. He enters the virtual meeting room.

He finds himself on a balcony overlooking the sea. A slight sound of surf is audible. It feels a little uncomfortable, sitting like this in his office. He has never been a great fan of using glasses. The inconsistencies between vision, sound and touch make him a little nauseous.

A woman is standing beside him, looking out at the breaking waves. She is slim and attractive, with dark hair and a middle aged face, young and old at the same time.

"My name is Connie Cortina," she says. "I am executive director of a company called Vascon."

"Jonas Lindgren," he reciprocates.

"It's nice to meet you, Dr Lindgren. I've been following some of the debate, thanks to a friend of yours."

"Who? Joe?"

"Joseph, Joe, yes." She exudes an elegance that Jonas finds charming. "I hope you don't mind my interruption. I have been reading about about your struggles for Norwegian research. I find them very interesting."

"Thank you," he says, uncertain of what else to say. "What can I do for you?"

"I wanted to lend you my support."

"Your support?"

"Yes."

Now he is perplexed. "What kind of support? How can you help me?" Then, he adds: "Forgive me, I don't mean to be rude."

She shakes her head, matter of factly. "Moral support to begin with. It is hard work to go against one's own government. I wanted to talk to you about my own experiences and perhaps lend you some of my thoughts on this."

"Are you for or against my writings?"

"I don't think of it really in terms of sides. There is only one alternative for any country—to survive."

"What do you do?"

She considers her answer for a split second. "My company is a large concern. It sponsors good-work projects in research and education. It is rather complicated to explain why and how. Let's just say that I am always looking for allies around the world. Those of us who believe in such things are few and far between."

Jonas laughs without humour. "That's interesting," he says, unsure of how to respond. "What kind of allies are you looking for?"

"People who can stand up to the storm and face the future, as you have done." She wants be his friend.

"Well, I am open to all kinds of input," Jonas says. "But I'm a little taken aback."

Cortina smiles at him and swishes her hair. "My company has many specialties, but information is our business. I have a group that works with the police forces of many countries to trace threads of crime and corruption. We have work related to the global VR games. But, whenever I can I return to the issue of education."

"I don't follow you."

"An incident that you reported recently, related to a threatening phone call was correlated by people working with our company, with data from international police forces and our models put together a scenario that was very interesting."

He starts. "Me? How did you know? I'm not sure I understand. I thought you were talking about the research articles. . ."

"This is very complicated, señor Lindgren, but your police report formed a missing link that allowed us to see connections in the patterns of behaviour across Europe. My company specializes in this kind of analysis, and we work with Interpol to weed out organized crime."

"Mafia?"

"Not just the mafias. There are many players in the game. The report was useful because it placed activities in this area close to others that were close to others. . .and so on. We have expert modellers who put together hypotheses about organized criminality."

"This is all a bit confusing for me. I am new to this. I am not used to being so . . . involved."

"In this instance, we were able to use it to shut down the group who contacted you."

"You. . .? But I heard that . . . Can I ask who it was?"

"Just amateurs, associated with a Christian religious group from Eastern Europe. They were not very smart, and that helped us to pin-point their identities. I doubt that you will hear from them again."

"That's amazing. I'm a bit flabbergasted."

"Take a moment."

"How can you know about this police business. Are you with the Interpol group here?"

"I know of them."

"But you're not working with them?"

"No, but our company is very powerful. We develop the systems used by the police forces and we donate some funds to them whenever we can."

"And this gives you access to their data?"

"Exactly."

"So, if I am hearing you correctly, then from this, you became interested in me, here in backwater Norway?"

“Not really. At least not directly. It is just that the power of analysis, sometimes brings you to places you do not expect, Mr Lindgren. That is why we do research, no?”

“Yes. I’m trying to remember that.”

“And so we come to the other matter.”

“Of course.”

“I started to look into your work, wondering if there were any deeper reason why you were approached.”

“Was there?”

“Possibly. I don’t think so. I’m not sure. But I learned something of the dilemma you are facing.”

“Any in particular?”

“You see I have several projects that I have made my work, and one of them is fighting ignorance.”

Jonas does not know how to respond. Conversations in the VR are hard to interpret. The body language is primitive.

“Ignorance is not bliss,” he jokes.

“Not unless you are a radical Christian activist,” she parries.

Jonas’ radar flicks on. “Christian radicals. They seem to be cropping up everywhere these days.”

“Yes they do, don’t they?”

“But Joe. . .”

“You have a number of good projects in your research council proposals and they are about to be turned over by a directive that comes from one of the most powerful of these groups.”

He nods inside his glasses.

“I want to ask you not to allow these important projects to be displaced by a cheap political gambit that your government is being coerced into.”

“It seems that I no longer have the power to make that decision.”

“Hold off as long as you can. This is a matter of importance.”

“What makes you say that?”

“This pressure to divert your funds is not based on a sound judgement. It could still blow over. There are groups working against these organizations in several countries, and on several fronts.”

He thinks of Sara, and Edward Bishop. “Yes,” he says. “Yes, I know.”

“The team you would send to the famine area will achieve nothing. That is not their purpose. The aim is simply to delay progress in more important works. I know this to be true.”

“But how?”

“Because I attended the meeting at which the decision was made.”

Jonas looks shocked. She cannot see his expression in the VR, but she can probably guess from his silence.

“You were at the meeting?”

“Yes,” she says quietly. “It was a meeting of the game consortium in fact, but the originators of the game are people with powerful friends and strong motivations. Some of them are good and some of them are not so good.”

“Who?”

“Oh, the rich and the bad and the ugly. You know. People who still have power, but are seeing it crumble in this new age of street gangs and mob wars. The famine aid is just a cover. Money means nothing in this situation. What matters to them is that they can exert control over society’s thinkers.”

“It has always struck me as odd that, when one can simply eliminate billions of dollars of debt, or that countries can continue to go on with budget deficits the size the U.S. has, that one would need famine relief from a source like research money.”

“Yes, money doesn’t exist. If you wipe out money, we still have everything except for the financial acrobatics that the banks perform. And when you realize that our world is ruled by an enormous Virtual Reality game called the global economy, it makes perfect sense. It is pure pinball based on a fictitious scoring system. Anyone can say: I don’t care what my score is, at any time. The only real consequence is that they piss off all the other players. But it doesn’t change anything real.”

“So when a government from one of the richest countries in the world comes and tells you that you have to divert funds from research to famine relief, you know that they are covering up something.”

“Exactly.”

Jonas feels a little stunned, numb in his seat. His hand knocks into one of the sheets of plasterboard that they have filled his office with and it jars him back to disoriented concentration.

“All right,” he says, taking some breaths. “All right.”

Ms Cortina gives him some time to think. Then she says: “But, of course, you are asking yourself why.”

He nods.

Damn right.

“Yes, tell me.”

“Well,” she treads carefully. “I wish I could tell you exactly why. I am not sure I understand it myself.”

“But you have an idea? A theory?”

“Yes I do.”

“So?”

"The church leaders who are sponsoring this activity have seen a trend. They see that people are getting dumber."

Jonas laughs despite himself. "Getting dumber?"

"Yes. Society has been dumbing down for decades. They see this as an opportunity to get back what they have lost to science over the years."

"You are serious, aren't you?"

She nods. "Knowledge is religion's greatest enemy."

"Because knowledge is subversive?"

"It is counter to the authority of the church."

"Yes. . ."

"They locked up Galileo, had a go at Darwin. . ."

Cortina's figure comes closer to his, filling his vision.

"And you think society is getting dumber." He nods. "Well, I can't disagree with that."

"It is an inevitable process. Perhaps it is even a phase that every civilization has to go through."

"Yes," he thinks, not really agreeing with her, but the wheels and cogs of his mind race with thoughts that he has had a thousand times, yet never quite assimilated into a coherent jigsaw puzzle.

"When society learns, it begins with real hard-earned knowledge. It takes a long time and a lot of sweat to acquire. Sometimes we have worked for years to achieve it."

She is talking about herself, Jonas thinks. This is a smart lady, however eccentric she might be.

"Gradually," she continues, "Knowledge becomes assimilated into our consciousness at a deeper level. We begin to speak of it without the need to explain or elaborate. We begin to take it for granted and see it as a part of who we are."

Jonas pulls himself back from his own thinking to follow her. "You mean society takes it for granted."

"Yes. Finally, that hard earned knowledge gets passed on to those who have not toiled and struggled for it, to those who have not tasted the sweat on their brows or the thrill of understanding; that is when we begin to disrespect it. The knowledge becomes like a war veteran, something laughably caught up in a past struggle. We reduce it to simplifications, to slogans and jargon, perhaps even to Three Letter Abbreviations, whose stories and details we have now forgotten. At that point, damage has occurred. Society has lost the value of the knowledge. And a whole new generation must relearn it all over again."

She makes a eureka noise and freezes amoment. The background imagery in the VR changes. She projects them into an image of the Los Angeles traffic machine.

“Here,” she says. “Look at this traffic chaos. It speaks of miracles, Jonas.” She calls him Jonas. “That so many careless, half-competent idiots can get behind the wheel of such dangerous equipment, and not simply end up in a pile of torn metal, seems astonishing, don’t you think?. There is surely a lesson to be learned from it.”

“What lesson?”

“That trained monkeys can do this task,” she says. “We are so proud of ourselves for mastering this simple task, and yet it means nothing. It requires little skill that is not merely the domain of our primitive brains.”

“It is mainly motor skill, yes,” he agrees, acknowledging the pun.

“The same is true for most things. Once the hard part of thinking up the inventions is done, once the technology is in place, you don’t need to be a great expert. You don’t need great precision or fine control to make the world work. It is robust. There are basic protective instincts built into humans that allow them to escape the most bizarre of catastrophic ends. We don’t need to be utter control freaks – things will sort themselves out. We just need a little faith. That, of course, is what the church relies on. What is truly surprising is that we advance – and that requires conviction and concentrated effort.” Her hands gesticulate with a passion. “For all our reputed intelligence, we get by on nothing more than primitive instinct for most of the time. And yet we have surpassed that reflex in our creativity, in science and in art.” She shakes her head and continues more quietly. “Now that we have created our lap of luxury, we must not fall asleep in it, like Rumpelstiltskin.”

Jonas looks at her with admiration. He wishes he could see what she really looks like. “You don’t think you might be overstating things just a little bit?” Even as he says it, he knows that she is right.

“No, Mr. Lindgren, I am not. I wish I were. But already the forces of trivial economics and faith are dominating the behaviour of society.”

He cannot disagree with that. It’s the paradox of the century.

We’re consumed by trivia so there’s no room in our heads for expertise. At the same time, we’re so singular in our privacy that we cannot even mix the ingredients of a half-baked society.

“Society truly is becoming the proverbial ‘bewildered herd’.”

“This dumbing down of society is not just about entertainment. It concerns our most important institutions, our education, our subservience.” Jonas wonders how her passion would sound if she were speaking in Spanish. “I am here partly because your friend, Joe, is part of a group working against the kind of ignorance that some would have us perpetuate.”

“The Get Smart programme. Yes. What ignorance, in particular, are you speaking of?”

“Today it is the leaders.”

Jonas laughs now with genuine amusement.

Cortina laughs too. "Perhaps I am talking too much? It is a habit of mine."

"Please continue. Our leaders. . ."

"Our leaders, yes. Well, you know, in our information society, it is not the leaders who are the card holders anymore. In ancient times, in the days when Europe was a melange of warring houses, it was a hierarchical society. The leaders and their aids were the most educated persons and all they needed was obedience to carry out their commands. They had their Machiavellis and others to advise them, but basically the expertise was at the top."

"But today the expertise is at the opposite ends of the tree."

"Exactly. The roots are dying and the leaves prosper but for the fact that they are shackled to their roots and their aids, the inflexible branches. Now they want to stop that from changing, by stunting the leaves, by taking away from people the basic right to be good at something, to succeed. The right for one person to be better than someone else."

"Hmm." Jonas nods. "Everyone is equal until proven guilty." He nods. "I know this tendency. It has been around since the seventies here. It almost ruined our maths education."

"Before it was only the poor who had the luxury of ignorance. Now it is the opposite. The rich and powerful—who can lead because they are already *ahead* in the Western view of economics—are increasingly falling behind the curve required to understand the world. This is dumbing down. Yet they retain the power to bludgeon us with instruments beyond their understanding, simply because we all play the game of money."

"Welcome to my world."

"It affects everyone. We are simply closer to it."

"So how do we change it?"

"I am asking you to take a stand. Norway has a history of standing up for moral principles. I am asking you to do this now."

"But you realize that I, too, am just a puppet of the government if they want me to be?"

"Don't believe it," she says, shaking her head and piercing him with the shrewdness of her gaze. "Whenever They make laws, they set traps for themselves. Use your imagination." She smiles. "You must think me slightly mad to come to you and say such a thing; but, you must understand the reason."

Jonas nods.

"In a sense, technology is a test for society. It enables us, allows us to co-operate, use agriculture to feed millions, make tools for others, have division of labour. But there is also a trap. We have moved from being a loosely-knit flock of do-it-all into a tightly woven fabric of specialists."

He nods, impatiently. "Yes. But we are killing off the specialists now. Now that we need them."

"Yes, you see it too. These specialist skills are of paramount importance to our society. Once we have division of labour, there is no turning back. We no longer possess all the skills to survive without our neighbours. If the electricity suddenly were to go away, or the telephone suddenly refused to allow you to talk to the producers of things, could you survive? We have seen what happens in the great natural disasters that wipe out civil infrastructure. People become lawless and opportunistic savages again—just as the poor areas of the U.S. we are seeing now."

He sees it. If trust in the delegation of responsibility breaks down, if the roles are not carried out properly, the system itself breaks down, and no one can fix it, because they no longer have the skills to do anyone else's job.

Today, society is not just local, it is globalised to the point at which the entire world could crash if a part of the system ceased to work. As the Romans were fond of saying: society is never more than four meals away from anarchy. Perhaps *that* is what killed the dinosaurs, Sara might say.

"So you see that we are committed to civilization. We cannot go back to a simpler life, at least not without causing massive fatalities. But society is becoming lazy, dumbing down. We have invented technology after technology that makes us into passive, button-pushing servants of machinery, reducing real knowledge to simplistic, searchable keywords. In a few years, the dumbing down of school curricula will result in a consumer culture with no skills. When that day comes, there will be no one to repair the machines, no one to save us from the collapse. Without education, society is on a downward spiral to disaster."

Jonas stares at her, half seriously, half wishing that she had picked any other day of the year to bring this to him. He cannot quite find the words to respond.

She examines his intensity, as if reading him. "Mr. Lindgren. I have been fighting for this belief for as long as I can remember. Sometimes when I lie down at night, I feel that I am helpless against this tide, as if I am drifting on a restless ocean, with no port in sight and no lighthouse to warn me of the rocks. And yet I think this: if a group of philanthropic industrialists can produce a counter-force to this senseless plundering of the globalized economy, then so be it. It is a fair fight."

"In just a few years, the canvas of the world could be repainted," he ponders. "Skill is easily squandered, and not so easily regained."

He looks about at the scenery, which has reverted to their seaside balcony.

"But, there is a chance: it is not certain that the government can bring about their own plan. There are, in fact, rules and regulations that are getting in their way. Things don't move as fast as they would like."

"So you could delay it? Perhaps even stop it."

"We'll see. It would be a funny irony indeed if the Norwegian state bureaucracy were the ultimate barrier that prevented this plot from being implemented. Truly a clash of the titans: the irresistible force meets the immovable object."

She smiles. "I like the idea."

"If I can tie things up in process for a while and distract from the issue, it might not pass through the ministry for some time."

"Politics is about timing. If you delay it, it could become unimportant to them. They might even change their mind."

"Yes, a change of context could mean a change of priorities, yes. Perhaps it would even be possible to make them actively support research again with some kind of advertising campaign.."

"This is what the game itself is about. This is why we are here."

"A battle for the greatest cause."

Jonas remembers where he is, in his overrun office, in the middle of a bureaucratic tackle for a ball that no audience really cares for. If he hadn't invested so much of his life in science and the people who do it, he might be less inclined to put himself in the firing line. But this is his moment. Fate has handed him Excalibur and told him to save the world. He can at least try to save a few of its souls.

"You should have met my student," he says. "This is really all just the theory of signals. She is an expert."

"Then use her. Make people stand up for their survival."

He can see himself as a knight. "A campaign to save education from the clutches of theocracy."

"Remember to use your greatest asset: thinking. If, like the politicians and advertisers, you only paint in broad strokes, with a fat brush, you cannot go into detail—you are an impressionist. You might be lucky and get some of those details by chance, but your fortune is not in your hands. Wave a flag, pick a brand, sing an anthem. . . You need to be more specific to push the buttons."

"And I even have an idea how. . ."

"Our technology can help you. It was developed for searching for gene actions in humans, but it allows us to trace the channels of cause and effect in the actions of any information system. It is very powerful, and it is being used by the international law enforcement agencies already."

"That's how you found me."

"Yes."

"So you can unwind the ecological web."

"In a sense, yes."

"A mixture of delay and de-stabilizing the current policy."

He experiences a feeling of satisfaction as if something has been accomplished. Remember the days when he was still a teacher, not just a bureaucrat?

He used to measure the success of his time by whether anything was communicated, whether any deeper understanding was achieved, whether they had moved forward.

“So, if you see a colour that is too strong in your landscape. . .”

“Paint over it with big whitewash strokes.”

She nods as if this was something she has always known.

“Just like Sara,” he says absently.

“I must leave this meeting now,” she says. “But I am glad we had this talk. Good luck with your work.”

Jonas makes a bowing nod. “Thank you. It has been a pleasure meeting you.”

“Yes,” she agrees.

“Perhaps we can keep in touch?”

The image dissolves without an answer and he is left staring at boxes and plasterboard.

Later in the day, as he walks out to the Lighthouse café, he thinks about their conversation again. How it all makes sense to him.

As he passes the demolition parking, he stops and looks at the cars with momentary surprise. It fades quickly into satisfaction and then laughter. Freshly fallen snow has transformed the randomly parked cars into utterly indistinguishable white humps of snow.

He mouths the words: “Told you so”.

*

Jonas faces the ministry’s administrator with as calm an expression as he can maintain.

“How can we expect to rely on people’s brains when we have been systematically erasing them for the last forty years?” he says.

In response to his media attention, the ministry has issued a statement talking about its reform of the education system. It will require a higher level of documentation and quality control measures to make sure that the stupid academics are doing their job properly, not just sitting around thinking. The ministry claims that kids are no dumber than before, and that they will rise to the challenges of the new decade. This diversion of research funds is a necessary and temporary step for humanitarian ends.

Jonas continues, “We are beating up our thinkers, drowning them in the syrup of administration and economic board games. The need for administration is viral. it is a self-sustaining process. Adding more formalia is like putting an eagle into a jungle and expecting it to fly.”

It really is true, he thinks. I am not just selling her point. Every day I get more post, more mail, more telephone interruptions. In the end there is no room for

anything other than servicing the noise from others. When signal gets drowned in noise, we are lost.

"How can you expect me to sanction a change that will result in the abrupt demise of a young girl's career?"

He has been bombarding the administrator with focused information about the consequences of the proposed change. He has read them diligently: Jonas was careful to present them with the proper protocols and procedures. And one has to give the man his due, he does his job properly and professionally, however misguided it might be.

He returns to him sometime later with a new set of procedures, from a different set of regulations.

"If you can fill out this form by the end of the day so that I have it by tomorrow morning, I can bring the matter to the attention of the European Parliament, who might be able to bear some influence on the matter."

"You would do that?"

"It's a legitimate procedure. It is part of your right of appeal."

"I wasn't aware."

"This is why you need a professional bureaucracy to manage your affairs. Glad to be of service."

Jonas smiles a little bit on the inside. You just never know what's going to happen next.

*

Later Jonas feels sufficient optimism to risk calling Kaja. It is a long walk through the snow to her flat, but the cold air feels refreshingly appealing after what seems like a long day. She receives him with a suspicious scowl.

"Martin is with my mother," she says.

He lifts his head in acknowledgement.

"I need you to explain to me what happened last week. Why you disappeared."

"It's kind of complicated," he mumbles.

"Why won't you talk to me?"

He doesn't know how to answer.

"Isn't your son important to you?"

"Of course he is. . ."

"What about me? Don't I mean anything anymore?"

"Yes you do."

"If you spent a little more time with us, I wouldn't have to spend my whole time trying to call you and get you to do things for your son."

"That's not fair, Kaj. I try to find a good balance."

“Oh, balance. Of course. Let’s not let us be too important, Jonas.”

“Kaja, I love you, but you make it quite difficult sometimes.”

“I love you too,” she says more softly. “But we need you to be around.”

“You have other people in your life, Kaja,” he blurts. “I can’t be around all the time.”

“That’s none of your business.”

“No it isn’t.”

“Had we been together, it would be different.”

“But we were together and it wasn’t.”

“You’re no better, Jonas. You act as though your needs are more important than mine, but you’re just the same.”

“I have work. . .”

“Always working, yes. You never have time for us.”

“I have responsibilities, Kaj.”

“Don’t give me that bullshit. Fuck you!”

“Kaj. . .”

“Your work is just more important than we are. That’s it, isn’t it?”

“Sometimes it is, yes. I have to make that decision sometimes.”

“Fine, go on then. Get out! Get the fuck out of here and go to your stupid job. I know it is more important to you than anything else – more important than me.”

“You know that is not true – but this is real. It is not your fairy tale world.”

Why did he have to say that?

“Fuck you, Jonas!”

“Don’t exaggerate and get all upset.”

“Oh, so will you stay now? Will you spend the weekend with us now?”

“I can’t spend the whole weekend. We can go somewhere, maybe, tomorrow.”

“Well, perhaps that’s not convenient for me, Jonas! Maybe I can only do something tonight. Why can’t you just do something right for once?”

“I have to do something now. This has to be done by tomorrow, Kaja. Hundreds of people are waiting for this. They are expecting it, relying on me.”

“And I suppose you couldn’t do it in working hours? You had to wait until now!”

“Yes, actually. I was waiting for someone else to finish their part. So I couldn’t.”

“So that means it is not your fault if it is late. Why do you care?”

“It might not be my fault, but it is my responsibility.”

“And what about me? What am I supposed to do in the mean time?”

He shrugs. “I’m sorry, I’ll make it up to you.”

“Well, fuck you! Just get out!”

He looks mournfully at the floor for a moment and then summons himself to leave. He closes the door behind him and hears her scream and throw something at the space he has just closed between them.

56

Vibe is playing with the sims, toying with the characters like dolls in a doll house, as if she would ever lay her fingers on anything so prosaic. She prefers the challenge of playing with real people who don't know when they are being manipulated, but there is no one suitable in range.

Preeta is working her own magic, collaborating with Dermot on some private channel that Vibe prefers to keep well out of. The guy is seriously weird or something, but Preeta seems to like him, so who knows. There is certainly no accounting for taste. Preeta has been unwinding the skein of intricacies in the information network and is gradually showing Vibe how the patterns form. She has been learning at an impressive speed, and they have grown together into a mutual admiration society of two. Several long days have passed getting to know one another while working on this problem.

Preeta feels like fate herself, tangling with the ley-lines of cause and effect. Something draws her mind back to that fanciful intersection from her journey: the child and the ice-cream. What happened to that child? Has his destiny been realized yet? Has he changed the world forever? Is there still some role for him to play to make his difference to the future? And what about her own role? Will she make any contribution to the world that yet remains to be acted out? She does not *feel* fulfilled yet. That, at least, must be a good sign?

All in all, for all their petty distractions and foibles and neuroses, the rag-tag team has been working well together. They have come together as an unlikely, if not unholy union, working remotely or closely as moods and neuroses dictate. But they have made several strides of progress, thanks mainly to high spirits. That has pleased Bishop, and attracted the attention of several others.

Vibe has been talking to Dr Lindgren now and then and he has given her his time with a willing struggle, lending her ideas and suggestions. He seems to have some new hobby-horse that has inspired them along their current path of

action. Based on those teasing splinters and arrowheads, they are constructing a bow from which to launch their weapon, out of the spinal curvature of their sagging postures. It is nothing if not back-breaking sitting at these terminals, inspecting thousands of lines of meta-code, hour after hour. Dermot is king at this task, however, whoever and wherever he is.

“Dr. Lindgren is really going tooth’n’ nail at this,” Vibe tells them, as they play. “He reckons I might not have to give up my PhD after all, if he can get past this next few weeks without letting dropping the reins.”

“Really?” Preeta lights up in sympathetic optimism.

“Actually, I have no idea,” she confesses. “But the thought is a good one, don’t you think?”

“Look on the bright side,” she nods. “It must be awful not knowing?”

She smiles. “I’m getting better at living with it.”

A disturbance wells up in the darker girl’s hind-brain. “Will you go back, if you can?”

Vibe regards her without expression from the corner of her eye. “I’ll think about it when it happens. For now, I’m having fun.”

Although she pretends not to notice, she senses the relief in the satellite bodies around her. There is no denying that she has found a niche here that works for her and for the others. It is as though she is the final spark-plug that released the energy of this little engine. They needed her, and she delivered. It is not often that one gets to be that appreciated.

Maybe I’ve been chasing dreams for too long.

“Don’t underestimate the value of serendipity,” Preeta says. “It is also possible to enjoy something that you haven’t chosen yourself.” She says it with a wink, but Vibe feels it as a slap in the face. Vibe looks back at her and ponders.

Hmmm. You think you know me, eh?

Perhaps she is right. It is not written on her birth certificate that she always has to get her own way. Maybe it’s okay to let someone else make the decision now and then. It can still be the right one. She smiles at herself, at her own prima Donna arrogance.

Look at it this way. If it works out for the best anyway, then you really did get your own way, right?

Nina has been hanging around them, watching and learning. She is the sorcerer’s apprentice, just starting as a student, but she has already found her two role models. There is little she can do, with or without Mickey Mouse ears or a pointy hat, but if enthusiasm were a key, then they would have enough of them to build a piano from here to Mars and back. Mostly she runs back and forth, watching the others at their work, oohing and ahing. It bolsters their egos and keeps them supplied with drinks. Vibe’s casual characteristic of her was that of a badly fired rat, ricocheting helplessly about the walls of its maze.

Not everyone is so focused, however. There are other issues in the mix of this little group than the solution of Interpol's socio-computational puzzle for the betterment of mankind. Vibe and Preeta have been colluding on their own projects. These two stealthy ginger cats have been spending time looking after their own destinies, scouting through the nooks and crannies of police databases. Just the previous night they spent searching through the Interpol cobwebs, looking at what is known about Kuala Lumpur; now they have now turned their attention to the Norwegian forces, or rather one in particular. Vibe has missing property to recover, let's not forget.

It is not demanding work, but it has a certain thrill about it. This is hardly why they are here, and there might be questions asked if they are discovered. Fortunately, security is lax on the inside. The police database was trivial to access. It did not take long to find Patrol Pussy Radmila Eva Salberg, otherwise known as Jotunheimen Beat Bitch. She strutted her way down from the North or Norway; she has worked in Narvik, Alta and now she has been in the National Park area for two years. If official photos are to be believed, she is a regular beam of sunshine. More like moonshine, by Vibe's reckoning.

She is good for a certain amount of gossip and tall storytelling, but it is an incidental pass-time.

"Never mind the beat bitch. Let's find Frank," Vibe shudders. He is, after all, her best approach after this time.

"Frank what?"

"Not sure. Try them all."

"Ah, here we are. Frank Grøndahl. He's kind of cute."

Vibe flashes her eyebrows. "Actually, yes." Then a different thought flushes her enthusiasm. *Can you find Peter Green?*

How would she explain him?

Someone I've sort of been obsessing over. Someone who tried to put his hand up.

Maybe better to let that one go. Can't keep hanging on to a dead duck, or whatever the metaphor is in this situation.

"So what do you want to do?"

Why not just send a message to Frank. Kill two birds with one asteroid?

"We write."

She writes.

Dear Frank, thanks for your kindness in looking after me during my stay in Jotunheimen. Sorry I didn't get to say good-bye. Got called to an interview. Long story. Anyway, I'm still wondering what I'm

supposed to do about the mountain rescue business. Your colleague seems to have confiscated my backpack so I can't get my stuff. Any ideas about who I should contact?

So anyway, maybe see you next time I'm in town. Do you ski?

She examines her handiwork and nods. Leave the end hanging, ambiguous. That's good. Get those male hormones popping.

Preeta looks at her new acquaintance with a head full of questions and thoughts. Now is not necessarily the time to be asking them all, but one day she means to unravel some of her mystery. How can someone like Vibe exist? Doesn't she feel any sense of trepidation about tinkering with mechanics of the world? She seems to juggle with the threads of cause and effect as though they are her playthings. And, around her, the world neatly falls into place. Of course, it cannot really be true, and yet that is the unmistakable impression that she leaves.

And what of me? Preeta wonders. *I have been a runner, not a fighter.*

Part of her would like to emulate her new friend; another half knows that that is not entirely possible. You cannot capture someone else's spirit and hijack it for your own. She has seen people try, and the result is neither pretty nor flattering.

She cuts a beautiful figure though.

Vibe is narrower of frame than herself and has a boyish kind of charm that makes her look both athletic and divine. No one could deny that she is attractive at many levels. Every motion of her body seems animated, filled with life.

I am a China doll by comparison, she thinks. *Even with more make-up, I am less attractive. Because there is no beauty inside me. I am wax.*

Knowing the reason does not necessarily bring catharsis, but modesty owes her at least a return on her meager investment; she will call in the favour when her life has shed some more its old skin. There is time yet for the future, and time to explore what she really wants. Besides, if they continue to hang out, perhaps some of Vibe's magic will rub off on her.

*

For the first days of Advent, one might have been expecting angels to herald its onslaught, but angels are the scum of the VR, not the glowing portents of new things to come. Other creatures have abducted that role. And Preeta met some agents last night. One in particular.

One of the succubi identified it, or vice versa, it's hard to tell. It calls itself Mary Cheung and claims to be able to influence billboard advertising in certain

environments. She seems to want to help them. If true, this could be a major breakthrough. Of course, no one has any idea whether she is legit' but they have managed to compute a strategy that can make use of her, but which does not depend on her.

Did she appear of her own free programming, or did their own seeds sprout? They will not have the answer to that for some time to come.

What is interesting is that this agent is also claiming something a little odd: that the best way to achieve their goals might be through a programme of freewill and induced thinking in the players. That seems to tally with Dr Lindgren's latest rantings. It seems almost a little too good to be true. Vibe ran a factor analysis, using Preeta's new software just in case someone has been pulling their sweet feminine legs. The agents seemed legit'.

So how do you start the world thinking? Mary Shelley's Frankenstein tried a massive electric shock to the temples. Bea uses a cup of triple espresso filled to the brim with sugar, as a potion barely fit for consumption. Neither of these need go down well with Amnesty International, or even the international power conglomerates. What is needed is a yoghurt. A healthy new age alternative. Homoeopathic thought? Nope, too dilute to be workable. This will be the new-new-age yoga of the mind. Thinking had to come back in vogue eventually. Now they have to make people buy it like it's going out of fashion.

"I don't really care what we end up using this for," Vibe relays to the room as she chisels away on her digital sculptures. "It's just fun working on this solution."

"Do you think anyone will believe it? Do you think it will work the way we planned?"

"You don't know until you try it. That's why we do it."

She sees that Bishop looks pleased, and that is enough for the time being. As the time rolls on, Vibe murmurs softly in her trance.

"So we're approaching doomsday now."

"Yup."

"Where's the pimp? Where are our beauties?"

"Dermot has promised us a last-minute miracle."

She turns her head away from her screen for a moment. "Do you think he'll deliver?"

Preeta nods. "Yes." Then she adds: "If he doesn't, I'll not make him mince pies for Christmas."

"Mince pies, eh?"

"Mince pies."

"You hussy."

The days and nights run into one another in the failing light of Oslo's impending winter, and the group seems to be heading for a conjunction of physical and mental concentration. Even Jonas Lindgren has made the effort to come and see

their work in person, to impute the values of science to the champagne launch, to lend it the authority of the sceptic.

"This is a true conjunction," Preeta decides. "That sounds pretty New Age, doesn't it? Instead of a conjunction of the planets and stars, this is a conjunction of information flows and people."

"Which we have engineered together to create a unique situation," Jonathan crowns.

"A situation that allows a change to occur," Bishop enhances.

"I believe it's called punctuated equilibrium," Jonas informs them.

"And evolution shall be averted for lack of a catastrophe for now."

"All right," Jonathan calls, "Snow machines at the ready."

And, as they deploy their infectious mist, rolling it in from the great ocean of communication, it forms a wave of influence that seeps almost invisibly through the onion layers of the game. Changes begin to be seeded; perturbations destabilize the hybrid potentials. Even in the primordial mixture of characters and notions they have concocted, there is a new possibility threatening to emerge. It aspires to be the blueprint for that most elusive of creatures: success.

So now the real game is on.

57

The Senator's limo careers rapidly through the Washington districts, pursued by a posse of paparazzi journalists.

They are like a pack of rats, he thinks, or enraged chimpanzees seeking their pound of human flesh.

"We could lose this opportunity entirely at this stage," the aid tells him.

The senator views focuses on his aid, tearing his mind away from other things.

"Yes, it's almost as though someone knew exactly our strategy." His matter-of-factness belies his true anger at what is happening.

Dean adjusts his heart monitor, moving it aside, and pours himself a brandy as calmly as he can. The precariousness of his condition has not yet impacted on his equanimity. They can shoot you, but they can't make you beg.

This whole recent business fills him with a deep sense of suspicion and betrayal. It is almost as though there has been some kind of conspiracy to turn the tables against them. Only a few weeks ago it seemed as though their plan was invincible, and people were ready for it. They believed in the church's authority and its rightful place at the head of the country. Now what is going on? Stories about the legitimacy of the operation are leaking like Iraqi oil, every bit as explosive and poisonous. Journalists are behaving like a pack of hungry wolves, desperate to find some flaw in their authority.

Did we offend the press somehow? How did they find out about this?

Their competitors in government are rubbing their hands together in anticipation of imminent failure. The mobile voters were supposed to force the issue for them, but the game campaign has neither fully materialized nor been the overwhelming success that was promised. How much money did government spend on building this wretched white elephant?

And their little coup was to come as a surprise, and yet obviously they have known about the plan for some time. You cannot hide things from the secret service or the Three Letter Agencies.

What makes it worse? Despite the best efforts of his team, god-damned Senator Weisskopf is actually getting ahead in the polls again, trying to push for some hell-blazing school rehabilitation program. How could it be that he is actually popular in the southern states, for crying out loud? And with education? Some idiot has miscalculated badly and will pay for their mistake.

"Can't you lose these goddamned sharks?" the Senator barks into his intercom.

"I'm trying, sir," the tinny voice of the driver replies. "We have decoys on the way."

"Now even the FBI are breathing down our necks," his aid murmurs, in a state of awe.

"Relax, they have no mandate to come in here. We are not doing anything that would be construed as criminal. We are the ones trying to help the American people back to a righteousness. We are free to broadcast our ideas to whomever we wish."

"There are no borders other than the ones we make for ourselves."

"Amen to that."

He takes a slug of brandy, as if 'Amen' were to mean 'cheers' and yells another 'come on' at the driver.

"We have not given up our strategy yet, but things are right on the edge. Our game parameters are based on one set of assumptions. I'm not sure that they are still valid now." His aid mumbles, almost to himself, apparently in more distress than the senator himself, and almost as if he believes that the senator is not really listening to him—which is probably true. Denial is a powerful medicine.

"The educational campaign is making us look stupid," Dean grates. "We have been practically reduced to a comic chapter on the anthropology of ceremonial cultures. Long robes and gold and sequins. They practically turn the Reverend into a side-show Carney."

"The church leaders have been expressing their worry."

"We can't afford to spend any more on this. There are other matters to attend to as well."

"Spending is only slightly over budget."

"I'm talking about the riots, man," he growls. "What use is a shepherd if he doesn't even have a flock?"

His aid continues: "FEMA are addressing the problems of riots, but they are not getting anywhere fast. Some of them are turning nasty—anti-government, and anti-church demonstrations too in the state of California. But the state governments have no resources to implement the action plans. They're not going to stop anytime soon"

Dean barks a scoffing laugh. "The Federal Emergency Management Agency?" He pronounces with mock reverence. "Hah! What kind of joke are they. In a situation like this, they are the masters of an empire of dirt. What are they going to coordinate into action, eh? Fifty years of the American people looking at government as their enemy, and we have an emaciated infrastructure. The country is collapsing from lack of maintenance, and all because Americans won't pay taxes. If we were running the show, things would be different. You can say one thing about the church and that is they know how to manage their finances."

The car lifts them high into the air, leaving their stomachs behind, as his aid receives an incoming call. A glaze descends over him, or is it perhaps a nausea? If a condemned man can lose heart, his own has apparently skipped a beat. He looks squarely at his master.

"That was Jennifer. The Canadians have promised that they will withdraw their support for the military actions in the Middle East and Africa if the vote goes ahead. The Canadian foreign minister said. . ."

"Yes, yes, I get the picture. How in the blazes have they caught wind of this now?"

"That means that there will be significant pressure on the senate."

"Another leak."

"It would seem to be the case."

"Yeah, diddly." Dean is apparently succumbing to the influence. He seems like a huffy child now.

The car careers around another bend, evoking another curse from his lips. The aid begins typing away at his tablet, looking grim, nervous and pale.

"You know, my kid has a brother in the VR. Beth and I didn't want any more kids, so we got one of these sims that are designed for third world families. You

know, the kind that's meant to stop them from wanting too many mouths to feed."

"Yes, sir. I know the kind."

"They are actually not a bad little invention. Nice piece of American engineering."

The aid lacks the heart to tell him that the invention is Japanese, perhaps because his cardiac account is already struggling with arrears. The car swerves around a bend and hits a bump which sends them flying into the air. The senator's brandy spills on his leg.

"Damned game."

"Yessir."

"What about this Morris? Isn't he supposed to be working for us?"

"Do we really know if he is any good?"

"If he isn't we can sue him for all he's got."

"But then it will be too late."

"Our message will be heard eventually. The Lord will guide us." He reaches for the bottle of brandy, but another swerve makes him miss. "If necessary, we can remind the House of Representatives of their obligations. Michael has dirt on most of them."

"You mean blackmail?"

"Why not?"

"But can we get away with it?" The aid's spineless voice is shrill now.

Dean sits back in his seat without moving. The car seems to have stabilized and is driving smoothly on a freeway. There is a silence to chill the warmth of the car's interior. It seems to beckon to the ghosts of past failures and invite the circling of vultures.

"We'll do as we please," he pronounces sternly, looking out of the window at something indeterminate. "It was people like us who built America. The law was made to protect us, not defeat us."

"And the FBI?"

"Our hearts are pure."

"They do not know anything specific yet."

"Do you think they really despise us?" he says, absently. "China and Russia are doing their damndest now to squeeze us out of central Asia. If we don't move quickly, we could be set back years. Canada has been asking us to go easy on the French and the Africans."

What is he talking about now? His voice has begun to take on a slight slur. Is it the brandy, or perhaps another minor stroke?

"Sir, are you all right? Do you need your medication?"

"Idiot!"

Dean stirs from his statue-like pose and leans forward. He seems to be staring into space.

*

“So,” Ivar babbles, to fill a predicted void. “What are you going to do when this is all over?” He jabs his apple onto the end of a knife and thrusts it in front of Preeta’s mouth.

“Over?” she laughs. “What makes you think this is going to end?”

“It is not the journalist’s prerogative to suppose,” he plays.

“Don’t believe in that concept.” She raises a palm. “Sorry. This is like the pot of gold at the end of the rainbow. It’s only there because they know you can never reach it.”

“It is not over,” Bishop murmurs. “What have we really done? There is no stability. We haven’t stopped anything. Perhaps we have delayed something. But this isn’t going to help society find a direction to latch onto. We’re still a visionless economic merry-go-round.” He refocuses on the little group. “The important thing was to assemble a strong counterforce. That is the role of police, after all. I think our little group is onto something here. The FBI has set up some tests. They are going to be looking carefully at what we’ve done. We should try to solve them well. It will give us credibility and practice.”

“You don’t think we are ready to handle ourselves now?”

“That’s not the point.”

“Well,” Preeta says. “We might have been ‘assembled’, and we might be a success so far. What really interests me is who has been coordinating all of this? Who is behind it all? And don’t tell me it is all coincidence that all of us are here together with the right tools for the job.”

Bishop stares at her for a long instant, with a new respect and a kindly smile. *Good girl*, he thinks. “Does it really matter?”

“Shouldn’t we be allowed to know?”

Bishop purses his lips and avoids the remark. “None of this will make any difference in the long run unless something happens to back it up.”

Jonathan, ever at his heels, adds: “We’ve had our little forest fire, cleared some space so we can see the wood for the trees. But the forest lives and it will try to close in again. We have to hope that the signals we’ve sown are good ones.”

“In the end, it’s not what we do that matters. It’s what ordinary people think, and how they react. The law doesn’t exist without the basic agreement of common folk. They are the material we are trying to bend into shape.”

“One thing though,” Ivar laughs, in that geeky boyish way that he cannot control. “You have to admit, it’s pretty cool to know that our main weapon against the corruption of Christianity was Christmas.”

Vibe winks. “Pagan festival.”

*

In the game, Vibe's appearance is that of a stunning young woman, with a mere sheen of metallic spray to clothe her female form. Her skin-tight attire covers more her psyche than her avatar's body. Dermot finds himself staring and Preeta is equally entranced at her audacity.

She has with her a friend whom she calls Bea, who is equal in height but with a subtly different, similarly audacious figure. They have been playing along with the agents. Things are working out, thanks to Dermot's handiwork.

"This game is pretty cool."

"Think it's worth a BAFTA?" Dermot asks.

"The morality barometer is pretty cheesy."

"It was supposed to be."

Mary Cheung is waiting for the girls when they arrive.

"So, are you with us?" Vibe asks.

"Yes. Can I tag along?"

"Reckon that would be all right."

"You should meet my brother," Mary says. "He is going to be so excited."

And that means, he will do what she tells him.

So, the ghosts and denizens of the game have become adept at manipulating their creators, Dermot thinks. It is not really a big surprise though, is it? After all, the game rules are designed with just that in mind. They built the ultimate propaganda machine: naturally it would work on them too. But unlike a gun, a weapon of destruction, it does not kill: rather it becomes part *deus ex machina*, taming its master.

58

There is a gnawing in the wall, as if a giant woodpecker has taken nest there. She can't remember the doorbell ever sounding like that.

"Hello?"

No one on the speaker.

There is a soft knock on the door. Of course, there is someone ringing from within the building. What on Earth could that be about?

She opens the door and stares at the intrusion.

It is him!

Frank is here.

He is carrying her backpack over one shoulder.

"Hi, Sara."

The crease of shock ebbs into a thundering of blood in her ears. She might always get her way, but there are certain limits beyond which one expects to succeed.

"Oh my god, hello!" she stammers, struggling to quell a visceral tempest of questions and emotions.

Frank grins in amusement at her petrification.

"Can I come in? This is pretty heavy."

She looks at the backpack and remembers her manners. "Eh, yes! Yes! Sorry, come in!"

He steps through the doorway and she closes it behind him, peering curiously around the hallway to make sure that no other lurkers are hiding in the shadows. How did he get in?

"How did you get in?" she asks, finally.

"There are certain advantages to being an officer of the law," he winks. Frank releases the backpack from his shoulder onto a pile of her shoes. "Oops, sorry. I thought you might like to have this back."

"Are you kidding?"

"Nope. All checked and accounted for."

"Thank you! I mean, I didn't expect you to bring it. . ."

He grins back at her. "Actually, as it turns out, I was coming to Oslo anyway. I have a course at police college for a few of days, so I thought I'd see if you were home. You left in kind of a hurry and I wasn't sure if I had maybe done something to offend you."

She shakes her head in surprise, momentarily at a loss for words, and definitely not the coolest cookie she has ever baked. "Like what?"

He shrugs. "I thought we were getting to be friends, so I was disappointed when you were suddenly gone."

"I didn't really have time," she begins. "I got this call, about a job."

"A job? I thought you were studying?"

"Yes, it's kind of a long story."

"All right."

"But I had to leave in a hurry. It was nothing personal. I did send you a message. . .eventually. It took a little while to find you."

"Good."

"So. . .so. . .you're here!"

"Yes," he confirms. "Service with a smile."

"I . . . Oh my god. Ehh, so, look, have a seat. Sorry about the mess. I wasn't expecting anyone." She moves some papers and a few cups from the table, and laughs nervously.

He takes off his jacket and walks the few steps through a doorway to sit himself down on the sofa. It is a small apartment, but cozy.

"Nice apartment," he says.

"Thanks. So, eh, would you like some coffee or tea or something?"

"Actually, I can't stay long, but maybe later?"

Later? "Oh, okay." She examines his face. He looks less vulnerable here: harder, more confident, at home. She is not sure what she feels. "So are you going to be staying for long?"

"A few days."

"You already said that. Stupid me." She was not prepared for this. It's not fair! "So where will you be staying?"

"There's a hotel close to the college. Majorstuen."

She nods.

"So tell me," he asks. "What did you do to upset my colleague? How did this end up getting confiscated?"

She shrugs. "It's a long story. It doesn't matter."

"Good to have it back though?"

"My stuff is in here," she affirms.

"Maybe you should check everything is okay."

She nods. "Good idea."

Vibe drags the sack into the living room and clips it open. She peers into what was her home for the better part of a week. The pack is quite full: soft items on the top, heavier ones below. She begins to empty the contents onto the floor around her, making an impromptu campsite.

"Making a mess," she smiles, feeling a little as though she is undressing in front of him.

He seems to sense her discomfort. "Can I use your bathroom?" he asks.

She nods. "By the door."

The contents of the rucksack appear to be intact. It doesn't even seem as though anyone has looked through them. Pussy beat bitch was obviously just messing with her. Her tablet is there. It still contains some of the work she did before she left. It hasn't been synchronized with home yet.

Seeing this backpack again brings a feeling of strangeness to be home again. So much has changed. So many new things in her life. For a split second, she misses her family: her brother, her mother. Then she feels silly at the response.

She has crossed a boundary within herself these past weeks, an unexpected frontier of realization. Perhaps that is what it means to grow up, or perhaps it is the first of many changes in her life. It doesn't really matter, does it? She has

seen through the deceptions that life attempts to pile on. There will be no more romantic fantasies in her life from now on. There is a sense of ending, as well as a sense of beginning.

In the bottom of the backpack is a hard item that brings a new dread. She looks at the box from Mrs. Laurent. There it is. Her nemesis, in monolithic form. She could open it now. But does she need to? Does she want to know what is in it? Perhaps some things are better left unknown? She places it on a small table, where she can look at it, and ponders its form. What will she release if she opens it? How will it change her new life? A life that is working out well, which she is enjoying. Could she have both lives? Is that greedy?

Frank stands in the doorway. "Okay?" he says.

She looks at him. "Okay," she replies with a trace of melancholy, and her throat contracts so that she has to swallow to relieve the ache of guilt.

Frank looked after her when she was sick. How many people have done that for her? Now he has come all the way here with her backpack, on the slightest of hints. And he is nice, in an odd sort of way: not really the kind of person she expected to like, but the fact is there. And he clearly likes her.

"You know", he says, "it's not that far to Majorstuen. Maybe we can meet up while I'm here?"

She smiles. It is only about a kilometre. "But you're not staying long." The words seem strange in her mouth as though she is not quite sure how to phrase them suddenly. Why did she even say that? What does it matter how long he is here for?

He didn't ask to marry you, stupid.

"Well. It's not that far to Oslo either, and I'm getting transferred soon."

"Where to?"

"Guess."

She smiles optimistically and then it fades. He looks down at his feet.

"Okay then," he nods and moves to exit.

Vibe feels disappointment envelop and flood through her, in an instant. She has not really understood, before now, exactly what she feels about him. Their journey together has been serendipitous rather than planned, and all the time she has been distracted by a different, stupid romantic fantasy.

It is possible to enjoy something that you haven't chosen yourself.

Frank seems to reconsider and stops himself. "Give me a hug?" he asks, almost apologetically.

Vibe explodes into a toothy grin and leaps up from the backpack, embracing him needily. More than he expected, he reciprocates hesitantly.

Damn it, she thinks, I have to take charge here.

She pushes back from him and kisses him firmly on the lips for several seconds before looking him in the eyes and grinning.

“Wow!” he laughs back in amazement. Then again: “Wow!”

They laugh and hug again and steal another kiss.

“See you soon then,” she says.

“See you soon, Sara.”

They part slowly with a glancing farewell, grinning like two stupid adult kids.

Boys! She smiles. *So stupid, so necessary.*

Sara Vibeke Stensrud looks up to the ceiling to take in the moment. She feels somehow lighter than before, and jumps up and down twice to test the notion. The future is there in front of her. She knows a way forward. Perhaps it is only one of many paths, or perhaps it is the right one. She doesn't really care. It feels good and that, after all, is a good enough reason to follow it. Everything is going to be okay, she thinks.

Then, almost as an afterthought she remembers herself and smiles. Bea has got to hear this.

So then, out with the mobile.

Epilogue

It is May, soon to be summer, and all the trees are exploding with green and white blossoms. The heavy pollen-leaden odour of the bushes makes the air thick and hard to breathe.

Jonas is out walking.

For a few moments, he has time to be alone with his thoughts, thoughts that tumble amidst a garden of possibility, which borders on a landfill of corruption. He has brought a book with him—a novel, no less. He took it in virtual defiance of his pursuers. When was it last he was able to read for mere pleasure? How long has he been shackled by responsibility, his pleasure centres immobilised by fatigue? All that could be about to change.

He settles onto a wooden bench in the glade of the park, in a spot where he can enjoy the still water of a nearby pond. These moments of rest will do him good before they find him. A few words of something other than project descriptions, or rules and regulations: it helps to quench the impatience.

The park is relatively quiet here, at this late hour of the day. Most people are already on their way home from work, but there are some here. A woman strolls past him with her child and he pauses to admire their harmony. One has to envy the look of placid contentment, the calm rapport she seems to have with the youngster, as if some inner telepathy soothes their companionship with complete and mutual understanding. It is not exactly the way he frames his own image of fatherhood, with Kaja. Others seem to make relationships work, why couldn't he?

Perhaps there is a dozen reasons, perhaps there is only himself to blame. The time for judgement has, at any rate, passed. Now the challenge has become a different one: one of continuation, of redressing past mistakes and moving on

with future possibilities. He has been compiling a list of things he owes Martin, and now that there is more distance between them, he is even interacting better with Kaja.

Jonas can imagine now how a glacier feels, thawing from its own private ice age: all that independent water, once in free flight, dragged down into a pool of anonymity, locked into bondage by the grip of an oppressive winter, finally feeling its spirit released by a kinder, warmer sun. It signals the beginning of a new cycle. To happen all over again?

Perish the thought.

The woman continues on with her child, smiling at that sun, without a visible worry in the world. He envies her. He actually envies her.

In her footsteps, something stranger still: a large bearded man, dressed in black jeans and rock-group nano-shirt, ambles comically into view. Jonas turn his head slightly to see the man stoop and pick up the ice-cream paper which her child has dropped. He places it, with visible annoyance, into a litter bin near the bench.

Observe this overt display of civic responsibility! It is cause enough to be taken aback. The man is not a park employee. He is an ordinary man, with no apparent connection to her. On the other hand, he is about the right age, about the right profile. Could this be the result of Edward Bishop's work? Has this man been influenced in his thinking, in his attitudes by a succubus?

It is surely too early to tell who is responsible: whether the effect of their campaigning is measurable, or whether he is just an anomalous occurrence, a fortuitous anachronism of the modern world. However you look at it, this is a wonder to behold.

His mobile vibrates suddenly, with a simple message from Sara.

She replies simply: "The vice president was an algorithm?" He smiles at the response, uncertain whether she is joking or not.

Jonas posted a quote from a former Vice-President Al Gore: something about "the greatest discovery of all this research is that we can no longer can separate basic from applied science The disciplines are connected in ways they have never been before. . ." It seemed like an appropriate encouragement of her current work at the time: something to keep her on the hook of expectation. The machinations of bureaucracy are not over yet as far as her PhD is concerned, but Sara is a survivor. She will do all right, no matter what happens next.

Jonas tries to open his book. He has a lot on his mind that wants to say its piece. Reading seems out of the question. Another good plan extinguished.

Soon, soon.

This apparently bottomless process of defending the institutions of research and education has been long and arduous. It has taken him through trials and ordeals of stamina that would break many. Another man might have crumbled

before him, but he has been partially anaesthetised by his own personal conflict. Jonas has weathered the adversity with a brave face; but he also senses that he has approached breaking point several times along the way, as a donkey's back is broken under the incremental addition of an infinity of falling pieces of straw.

But why should he care about any of that today? Today, he could be the survivor himself. This could be it: the end of this little battle for his integrity. Now that the sun is shining, he no longer cares as much for the problems of office. He is purged by a pregnant sun and his own endocrine reaction. The burgeoning warmth of the day surrenders his worries to the realms of the academic, pun or no pun. And now also: a relative calm has fallen over his personal life, leaving him to feel unconcerned about the outcome of the final challenge: the one final obfuscation that will permit substance to triumph over style. Politics will surely have to accept reason.

But it is a delicate business, and not quite done yet. No wonder influence campaigns have to be planned so carefully: if the sun alone can cleanse an individual's purpose and passion, what hope does one have of ruling anyone's attention? Each little environmental signal is simply part of a grand regatta of impulses, sailing into the finish line, competing for the attention—for the prize of the human brain.

And if there were a god, he would have to be pretty disappointed that such a powerful and expensive instrument could be played so easily, by so trivial a troubadour.

It will not be long now. He had better put his book away and start walking. He will head towards the canopy of the trees to find some shade.

Jonas gets up from the bench and stands tall. More than ever, at this moment, he feels as though he is alone, but surviving. It gives him a taste almost of power, of self-confidence. It evokes an eerily surreal sensation. He feels taller, when he walks: he feels every step. It is dizzying. He feels larger than life somehow, hypersensitive. Motion is accentuated.

It is supremacy.

Mastery over oneself.

He takes no particular pleasure in the feeling. That might come later. For now, it simply is. He acknowledges it rationally and files the observation for possible use, like the orderly clerk that he is.

And then he comes to the little wooden bridge that bisects the pond.

He knows that they will have been alerted to his work by now, at the ministry. The final stage has to include them, as the EU commission challenges them to confirm their surrender of research funds against the basic guidelines of the community. And therein lay an unexpected pitfall for the government.

There is, of course, a difference between making the decisions and actually

wielding the axe. Both turn out to be double edged swords, so to speak. If a bureaucracy can hinder the implementation of the research council's independent decisions, then the council has an equal power to obstruct their intervention with bureaucracy. The mindless leviathan does not take sides, it merely lumbers with the obstinacy of habit. A commander of government can easily run aground on the perils of its own bureaucracy, for commanders generally trust their soldiers, under threat of execution, incarceration or even ex-communication. What will be his punishment?

He has seen through their game. The tune they dance to is one of short term gains: fast rewards and sound-bite press releases, neither methodical nor considered decisions. So, he has been learning the tricks of the trade and has moved his pieces carefully on the board to manoeuvre his opponent into a check mate. *Shah mat!* Die king..

It has ground him down, and worn him out, but he is still standing. So, at this moment, he has earned the right to be in the park, observing the young and the beautiful, without risking the guilt or repercussions that have haunted him over the past year. And, my goodness, the spring hatches these beautiful visions of womanhood from their cocoons in numbers. It does not matter that they are merely distant fantasies. To him, they represent hope.

For a moment he believes he sees Edward Bishop, but no, it is someone else. He has gotten to know the older man a little over the past months. He is looking older these days, but with a contentment about his work. Bishop claims that they have put a temporary cork into organized crime: mafia, vigilante groups, churches. Those organizations are opportunistic scavengers, who operate best when society is broken and fearful. If the game's many signals were to heal and unite people, if it were to be a unifying force for good, strengthening and educating people rather than driving them apart, it would signal an end to their power. He is their worst enemy. Someone built a crooked house, and his team is straightening it out. The world of tomorrow will live in the House that Bishop built.

That the churches have not visibly succeeded in usurping the power from western states tells them that someone, somewhere must be playing their games: games that his team has spiked with altruism. It would make an interesting research project to follow who is doing what to make it all work, but they have to simply take it on trust for now. That's fine. Somewhere in the world, pretty much anything you can think of is happening somewhere. That's what diversity does for you. As long as the melody resonates, it will find its place in the symphony.

Bishop's team is a bright constellation and they have helped him in unimaginable and intangible ways. Without them he might not have understood how to avoid the final move in his own game of chess. It was the Indian girl, Sara's new friend who told him: "Why is it that you didn't think of simply asking anyone

for help?"

It was an excellent question.

Have we become so independent, so disconnected that we cannot even ask our friends and neighbours to help us out in a time of trouble?

People don't ask each other for help anymore. His mobile doesn't have a menu option for that. It took an alien to diagnose the malady.

What is wrong with us that we cannot even recognize and come together when we have common goals?

They have become Africa, as Joe said. Life is mercenary in a selfish world.

So he asked for help.

And Bishop's bright constellation was happy to assist. He shrugged at the suggestion that he was being generous. "My voice has been heard," he confided. "I've done my little recruiting campaign and we've put together a plausible new force. My little mission has been fulfilled. Where does it takes us? Just to the next phase. Maybe yours in the next phase."

"What you've done will last, as long as there are people with skills to carry on the team," Jonas assured him. "With people like Sara at the wheel, a little bureaucracy won't be enough to stop it."

They might never know what was really going to happen. But that is not really the point is it? The point is that it is happening all the time. It never stops. And they are just participants and spectators. It's all one big fairground ride, where big splashes are really just little ripples. The game will continue with or without the VR. It has been running since the start of time. Right now, it involves the future of education and of society.

Jonas approaches the fountain pool and takes a last peek at his book and his moment arrives.

"Mr. Lindgren!"

It is the detestable Leif Erik Larsen, accompanied by two police officers. Bishop has provided them, and is watching their progress from somewhere. They will do their jobs, but their will not step over the line of the law for this petty power seeker.

"Good day, Mr. Larsen."

"I had a little trouble finding you. I believe you know why I am here."

He nods, carefully placing his paperback novel inside a small plastic carrier bag, and putting it into a deep pocket of his jacket to protect it.

"You want me to cancel the appeal application to the European Union's arbitration board."

"That would be the polite thing to do."

Jonas smiles.

"We do not consider it proper procedure to go over our heads."

"Funny that you should talk about proper procedure," he says.

"There is procedure and there is etiquette."

"Yes."

"So, you will withdraw the application." It is not a question.

"You are cutting it a bit fine." Jonas looks at his watch, ceremonially. "But then the ministry is rarely in a hurry."

"The deadline has not passed."

"Unfortunately, it is too late. We won't be able to make the deadline for withdrawal now."

"You have to cancel this," he says with a certain imperative.

Jonas shrugs. "I would love to help, but I left the codes on a tablet on my desk. I didn't synchronize them anywhere. We would have to go and find them."

"Then that is what we shall do."

"It isn't very convenient now," Jonas smiles. "I have taken the afternoon off."

"Mr. Lindgren, you do understand that hindering the state could be considered an offence."

"That would be criminal and irresponsible of me," he issues flatly. "Not my style."

"I have to warn you that, if you fail to cooperate, you could be arrested, and charges could be brought against you."

Jonas shrugs. "I don't think that will be necessary."

"Good, then we shall go to your office now."

Jonas looks at his wrist again. "People will have gone home now."

"Stop procrastinating!" Larsen spits. "Come with us now. We are going in there to cancel the order, before it goes through and I will need you to accompany me and show me where the codes are."

Jonas nods. "Very well"

They walk briskly through the park. Jonas does not drag his heels much beyond what is involuntary sulking. They have a car and escort waiting, but it would be quicker to walk back to his office, if truth be known. No matter, that is not his concern. The car carries them through the town's traffic machine, the few blocks to the small hill where the offices of the Research Council are located and they step out into the cobbled street.

The building looks dead now, though it is hard to tell from down here. Larsen and his entourage herd him to the main entrance, where his mobile identifies him and a code opens the door. They pass through the empty reception and summon the elevator. The metal-glass box lifts them to the floor where Jonas has an office and deposits them in front of a new pair of glass doors. They are locked.

A yellow cone with a stop sign is placed in front of the doors, and behind them, they can see a man with a buffing machine working. A sign hangs on the doors.

THIS FLOOR IS PRESENTLY OFF LIMITS
DUE TO
CLEANING AND POLISHING

The glass doors are locked.

"Open the doors," Larsen instructs.

Jonas shrugs. "I don't have keys to this door. The administration doesn't grant mere employees keys to the building."

"Mr. Larsen, don't waste time."

"Really, I do not have the key to this door."

He knocks on the glass doors to attract the attention of the man with the buffing machine. If he hears, he does not respond.

"Isn't there someone we can call?"

"I don't know the number of the company who cleans here."

Larsen becomes agitated. "Can't you open this?"

"Not without a key."

"Can we break in?"

The police officer makes a shake of his head. "I'm afraid we don't have the authority to do that. Mr. Larsen. Not without an order from the court."

He grows red. "I am the government. We make the law!"

"Not today, sir."

His face trembles with hatred and anger. He is bursting with some recrimination, some threat of repercussion, but he manages to contain it. He prances back and forth for several minutes, looking for some clue, but time is ticking on. There are no clues here. He could try to find out who is in charge, but Jonas knows that the cleaning staff will not part with their authority to close the floor lightly. There is actually little that any of them can do now.

Apparently realizing the hopelessness of it, he swings around and storms out of the building alone. He cannot get in. The building does not belong to any of them.

Jonas smiles. *So this time the victory will not be yours either. Today, the janitor has the final word.*

He shrugs to the police officers.

*

Even after all this time, Den is still confused about the way Catalin Cortina treated him. He is puzzled over her rejection of him as a man. It is not as if he tried to seduce her, though even that would have been better than what transpired. He feels soiled somehow by his encounter with her, and still he cannot quite escape the need to repair the misunderstanding, to win her approval.

That vanity might be the source of his unease could not possibly occur to him, for he has never seriously understood why other people, inclined along alternative planes of thought, cannot simply extend their friendship with physical intimacy, as would he in the same situation. When people allow themselves to be seduced, either mentally or physically, everyone feels so much better afterwards. Why would anyone bother to abstain? It is like a cessation of hostilities, a bridge of trust—a private bond between souls, not some merely superficial chit chat.

Of course, this is simply the blindness of a man that comes about from an excessive focus on his own performance. He is the Ptolemaic centre of his own universe: everything else revolves around that focal point of self.

He sought to use Catalin Cortina as a fulcrum for his own ascension; instead she gave him homework to do, as if her were little more than a naughty school boy. Now he flips between wanting to do the homework, to please the teacher, and wanting to purge all thought of the woman from his mind.

A causal onlooker might find the predicament an unreasonable and trifling concern, and imagine him to be wallowing in an obsequious self-pity: but that is only because they do not fully know him, or even begin understand what makes him who he is. There are good reasons for his ambivalence. His inner circle has noticed how he seems encumbered by a melancholy, but one does not ask about the whys and wherefores of such things in this day and age.

More than anything, he is unsatisfied with his own performance. He does not feel that circumstances have allowed him to demonstrate his abilities. An omen of failure hangs over him now, like a thief swinging in the gallows. Oddly, that thought weighs upon him more than most. Is it a failure to impress? Failure to steer the course of things? What is it?

Kylie McLachlan has been supportive in her tangential way, making fun of him, at his expense. Her humour and casual courting will carry him through it; she is a friend. And sensing his resilience, in spite of his wound, she has refrained from rubbing salt in the real sore.

If Den has hoped to rule the world, then he cannot do it as long as he cares what someone thinks about him.

Den looks at the invitation on his tablet screen.

VASCON INTERNATIONAL COLLEGE INVITES
YOU TO ATTEND
THE FOURTH INTERNATIONAL WORKSHOP ON
UNSUPERVISED LEARNING IN HUMAN
SUBJECTS

Vascon. That's her, playing with him. Teasing him.

He could grow to despise her for that. And yet he knows that she knows that he cannot strike back. The only way he could get back at her would be to beat her at her own game, and that is exactly what she wants.

He is most inclined to simply do nothing.

Instinct tells him: he can neither go forwards nor backwards, nor choose between the gods who have summoned him for their bidding. The only alternative is to stand still, to carry on business as usual. Den the player had been played. And yet, as a pawn in someone else game of chess, he will be discarded unless he is useful. Circumstances seem to have drawn the burden of responsibility not merely around him, but partially away from him; the religious factions have been backing off somewhat, in the light of recent and certain revelations (no pun obviously intended).

And, now that he is no longer their centre of attention, he feels oddly disoriented, as if he has lost his compass bearing. Have the church leaders and their stooges gone underground, into some doomsday crypt? Have they been arrested? He has not received a single word from them or about them. Nor has there been any direct communication from the government contractor, though that need not mean anything other than that they expect their job done. Perhaps it is time to make a mark that people will notice, once again?

Revenge? Pay-back? It would be a crude gesture, an unworthy gesture.

No, no need for that. The world needs directed imaging. He provides that service better than anyone. Therefore he is needed. It is the simple logic of commerce. So why does he not find comfort in the syllogism? However he shuffles his cards, he cannot help but feel uneasy: one day these government level contracts might come to a close, then it will be back to catching small fish.

For now, he will simply bide his time. Business as usual.

I don't know how to do anything else, he thinks miserably. *I don't know how to be anyone else*.

Besides, there is nothing like a pre-arranged routine to legitimise the avoidance of the present.

He flips further down his list of other messages, weeding out the advertising, until he comes to a report from his sister. She has been quiet of late. That is another thing that makes him uneasy. Mary informs him simply that the missionary herd is still moving forward through the game. Other than that, she is still engaged in some exploratory work, but nothing on that yet.

Yeehah. So the work of the church is still on-going, even if it has, for the present, been sucked almost entirely into the virtual realm. There is no stopping the word of the Lord. Somewhere, they are still out there, and you can bet that men in black suits will come knocking again. He is not sure whether that is a good thing or a bad thing. Perhaps she can negotiate his formal contrition with the gods of fortune, as long as she is out there.

Move on.

Further down the list is another note about the bio-tech giant: Vascon.

Vascon, Vascon, Vascon.

Companies rule the world today, but this is too much. There is no getting away from the head that roars loudest, unless someone from the office is playing a trick on him. The woman's tentacles seem to extend like creeping roots across half the world, in some form or other. She is a genuine nexus of power, while he is merely a wanna-be yea sayer. She has both wealth and influence. She hangs in the shadows, lightly plucking the strings, while he is trying to tug away on them. And on top of that, he is unable to dislike her. He admires her.

Bitch.

What he needs is a rest. A rest—and to talk to the one person who can both sympathize with his feelings and advise him about his strategy towards Catalin Constanca Alexandra Cortina: Celia Waites. After all, she was practically complicit in placing him before this multi-headed hydra. It might not be exactly fair to use her as his amateur psychologist, but it would certainly give him a legitimate reason to visit her.

Yes, Celia.

Since bumping into her in San Diego, Den has found himself thinking a lot of her. She has qualities—several qualities—that he admires greatly. She is elegant, demure, sexy but vulnerable, and she has excellent taste. She was surely thinking of his best interests when she connecting him to Cortina. That must be worth something in return.

Suddenly he is swimming in a memory of their time together: a curious meeting of minds and body, but wholly satisfying, unlike his short experience with Cathy Kim. Where did she go?

But surely he has better things to do than to go half way around the world just to satisfy his conscience? Well, not just his conscience. She is a fascinating woman and he has a feeling that she will be glad to show him more than a few fascinating things about herself. . .

I don't know how to do anything else. I don't know how to be anyone else.

Den sighs with something akin to resignation, or could it be recognition?

"We have met the enemy, and he is us", he recalls reading.

He looks down at his tablet and pulls up a list of things to do on his calendar. Meetings, brainstorm, reports to write. It is all there: all he needs to fill his head with pointless emptiness. But that is not what he is going to do. He flicks through it all several times, up and down, looking at it with weary disinterest. He has formed a different plan, and he intends to say yea to it.

No more procrastination.

His clicks his acceptance of the Vascon invitation and it is mailed in return, then he pulls up his directory. And now he is going to call Celia.

Yes.

He will call her.

He is going to call.

He punches call.

*

Another doorbell warbles. The old door-com phone falls off its hook as he lifts it.

"Hi it's Christina, can I come in?"

Christina? Dermot searches his mind to see if there is anyone—anyone else he knows by that name.

Christina? Surely not?

The search returns with failure and the inevitable conclusion sets his heart and mind racing.

"Yes, yes, of course." He is shocked. Confused. "Come in," he says, clicking the door opener.

The figure that meets him from the stairwell is a study in tragedy. She is a skeleton, thin to the point of malnutrition.

His imagination races through the possible causes. In a game, such a change could be the result of disease or hardship: a lack of points scored in earlier rounds. Could that also be the case here? Perhaps an eating disorder? Or poverty? She was never very good with money. She was never very good at looking after herself.

It is practically summer, but she is wearing a long black duffle coat to contrast with her blond pallor. Her face seems greyer now; it is not merely pale. She has lost something. It hurts him to see her like this: she is a dream that has developed a fault. A tragic fair angel.

"I'm not disturbing am I? Are you expecting someone?" She looks frightened, unsure, a mere fragment of her former self.

"No, no."

"I thought I would say hello. Is that okay?"

"Of course," he says. "Wow. That's great. Can I get you some tea or something?"

She looks into his eyes, searching his face with an almost tearful insecurity, as if she expects him somehow to be lying to her. "No thanks."

"So how are you?" he musters, after too long an interval.

She smiles, uncertainly. She does not know how to answer. She simply shakes her head slightly.

"Are you still living in the same place?" he fumbles, leading her to a sofa.

"A lot of strange things have been happening lately. So many strange things."

“What kind of things?”

She looks at him with that look again, as if she is saying: are you one of them? Her expression flirts with paranoia.

Dermot might not be a king in the realm of social relationships, but he can recognize the signs people make with their faces. He has always been better at looking than engaging. There is something wrong here. Something has happened to her. She is not animated in the same way as before. The parameters are different. Something is broken. And she is scared: frightened of what she might learn, from what he might say.

“Just things,” she answers and looks suddenly worried. “Where is everyone?” She stares ahead into space, occasionally glancing fearfully at him, as if to plead for his permission to be there. He considers how he might answer, and to which question.

“I don’t know,” he says simply. “Who?”

“It’s so quiet.” Then a shy smile flickers across her mouth, as if sensing that her worry is excessive. “So how are you?”

He nods. “I’m okay. Too much to do.” He laughs, trying to lighten the mood. “Always trying to do too much.”

“You’re pretty smart, aren’t you?”

He laughs again. “Well, I don’t know about that. . . Hey, do you still see that friend of yours?”

“As if anyone cared about me.” She sits, huddled into her duffle coat, thin as a rake, her hands deep inside her pockets. “What are you watching?” She points to the TV.

“News. I like to watch the news.”

“Is it war? A lot of funny things have been happening lately. It seems like we are at war sometimes.”

He laughs, but she does not return the laugh. He wonders if she really means it.

“Can I get you some tea? Are you sure? Would you like a piece of cake?”

“Cake?” She looks hopeful.

“I have some chocolate cake.”

She looks disappointed. “No thanks.”

“So do you still see your friend down in Little Asia much?”

She considers his question, as if dredging a slow computation from the bottom of her mind. Her eventual response is not what he expects.

“I like the Chinese. They are sort of peaceful—and smart. They had this great civilization.”

Dermot does not let go of his point. Perhaps she did not understand him. He knows that she visited a friend down near all the Vietnamese restaurants. She

was always talking about it. "But you had a friend who lived down there. You used to visit him. Do you still see him?"

She looks at him, examining him as if she is looking for some sign of betrayal or as if he is talking a foreign language. Or is she blocking out his thoughts? It does not compute.

"The Chinese built the wall, you know. It's supposed to be huge, visible from space. I've been going to the library you know."

He nods. "That's right."

"I used to go to the Deichmann a lot. I used to read. I didn't have anyone to talk to so I used to talk to the people in the books."

"Yeah, it's good to escape in books," he injects, supportively.

"I like the library."

"It's been a while since I was in a library," he thinks out loud.

"It must be a good thing to read a lot. You're pretty smart, aren't you?"

He shrugs.

"Everyone would stare at me in the library. I think they hate me there."

Dermot frowns. "Hate you? No they don't. Perhaps you feel that when you are depressed, but that doesn't mean that it's true."

She smiles momentarily, happy at his answer, but then the infinitesimal intervention of grace crumbles into fear once again.

"Anyway, how are you?"

He nods. "Okay. Okay, you know. I, eh, am working hard as usual. Thinking of travelling now."

"You have a pretty high IQ right?"

"I'm not sure everyone would agree!" he laughs, more suspiciously this time.

"You could be smart."

She must be desperately lonely, he thinks, and feels a flood of sympathy for her now. He compares her figure with how she looked when he first saw her, when all he felt was blind yearning and searching admiration. It was he who was the misfit then. She looked so normal, so much more respectable than he did. Now look at her. What could happen to a person to transform them so? What could go so wrong?

"So do you have someone that you talk to regularly?" he asks,

"You mean the doctors? They are all bastards. They think they can just tell you what to do and manipulate you."

Doctors?

"They put me away for a while."

"What about your parents?"

"Parents?"

"Didn't they live across the bay? In. . . what's it called. . ."

She shakes her head. "They're dead."

He frowns. They are not dead. He saw her together with her mother before he broke off his contact with her. Does that mean they are not talking to her? Surely parents would not abandon their child, not even a difficult one.

"Everyone is trying to manipulate you all the time, take advantage. It's not fair."

"Dead? How do you mean?"

"Doctors, pretending to care. They just take advantage of you."

Dermot stores a dulled shock, as though someone is feeding a persistent and persistently painful electric current through his body. Has someone taken advantage of her? Is that what has tipped her over the edge? He is not sure what to believe. Earlier he might have been unnerved by the thought of someone even touching her, but his growing sense of disbelief has been dulled down even further with endorphins.

"That's not good," he says stupidly.

They sit in silence for a few minutes while she watches the images on the TV, and Dermot struggles to prove that he is not mute.

"Why is it so quiet?"

He flinches from his racing thoughts. "Sorry. My fault."

"No, outside."

He shrugs.

"No one is around. I guess everyone is staying at home. It's Sunday."

"Is it Sunday?."

"Perhaps they are on holiday somewhere. Holiday."

"It's weird, I mean without people. Is it a war?" She picks up a leaflet on his coffee table and looks at it. "Are you joining the church?"

"Eh, no. I don't know." He takes it from her and packs it away at the bottom of a pile of papers, embarrassed. No one is supposed to see that.

"Someone told me to join too," she says.

"Maybe it would give you something to do?" he suggests. A church would at least give her someone to watch over her, something to be part of.

She shakes her head fearfully.

"Bad men."

Dermot exhales, sensing an incumbent heaviness prey upon him. He resets his mind, and summons his strategic faculties, realizing that he bears no emotional debt toward her, but somehow feeling culpable. If the visit is disturbing, it merely confirms to him, once and for all, that he has made the right decision to walk away from her all those months ago.

Pausing to chew his upper lip, he glazes over and extends into what seems like a space behind her face, for a long moment, looking both through and beyond her into his future—into her future. His imagination is easily up to such prediction; he is used to making such analyses in games. And for a moment it is

as though time passes before him and a possible future it played out. It is a future that he has seen before and which he knows only too well. It is something that confirms his belief that truth can be stranger than fiction and it holds a terrible fascination for him. It is the impossible, and he has made it the forbidden: an image that frightens him and fascinates him in equal measure. He beholds it and acknowledges it. Then his wandering mind gradually re-contracts back into the most immediate present, where she is trying not to watch him stare.

He makes his decision.

Dermot takes her out to a local coffee shop and buys her something to eat. He is not sure how else to make her leave, in a nice way. He tells her that he is expecting a visitor soon and that he has to return home.

"I should get back home soon."

She nods. "Everyone in the flats pointed at me you know. When I came."

"Attractive girl like you. They might look to catch a glimpse of you."

She smiles.

"It's quiet. Are you sure it's not war?"

He looks at her head, so close to his, her emaciated face, her malnutrition. Inside there is a brain, somehow damaged. What connections are missing from her program to so distort her view of the world? What perceptions have emphasized the poor judgement?

Is it the result of lethargy, inaction? Is it due to drug use, or lack of it? Is it a trauma that has shut down some crucial circuit, or perhaps a conspiracy of parts in her brain that have fragmented into independent, schizophrenic agents, all competing for dominance, and all of them losing. On top, there is still a remnant of her former beauty. She could be beautiful again. She has the framework, but not the support.

If he were to provide some sufficiently strong, unifying message, could he steer her confusion back into some form of integrated sanity? It is a powerful idea. They have done it for society, with the team. If they can do it for society, could they not do it for the society of mind? If he took her and retrained her in basic skills, like a dog, could those brain connections be re-established? Could she return to her former state of grace?

"Your guest is coming," she says. "Bye then."

He nods.

"Come by sometime," she says.

She walks off into the distance and Dermot wonders what he should do. She does not look back at him, she simply walks off in the wrong direction for going home. She has become a phantom, a lost soul.

Can she be repaired? he wonders.

He balks at the thought. Involvement would only mean a script for his own cerebral imbalance. She would drag him down like a lead balloon towards a

black hole.

Dermot walks back towards his flat. He will play some music and consider the matter. For now, his logical mind serves only to inform him that his decision to keep to himself is both justifiable and correct. Getting to know people is just too dangerous a sport for someone like him.

One is better off alone.

Dermot closes the door behind him and tries to forget the incident. If he sees her again, he will deal with it when the time comes.