

My name is Avien, at least it has been for a while. My body was built to be a killing machine, all except for my heart. I don't remember my past, or who made me this way. I am trapped in an underworld of corporate espionage. I don't exist. The people that I work with don't exist. I work in the nonexistent corporate carrion field, out of the public eye and hidden by deep shadows. There are many pawns, and players in this ever-changing lethal game. Everyone has their own reasons for playing, everything from lusts for status, power, money, excitement, or revenge to duty, honour, and friendship.

I cannot remember any specific details of my life before 2053. My only hazy memories consist of playing baseball on a nameless team, running around the playground, some blond haired girl with curls, and riding a bike. Occasionally I get a flashback of raiding a popsicle from the freezer, but these memories are no more mine, than one that I would created seeing on the trid. Yet oddly enough, I have no desire to really dig into my past. I feel as if I have been reborn with a purpose, and looking back would only be detrimental. Somehow over the last few years my life has become focused to try and make this strange awakened world a better place. This does become quite difficult the more I develop empathy for my fellow man and conscience about what I do.

I left the scene eight years ago, to find peace in the northern woods of the Rocky Mountains. I would still be there if my hardware didn't decide to act up. There are rumours of old runners that have their hardware removed when they retire. I considered it, hearing tales that the blackest clinics have some incredible techniques that will reset your DNA sequences so you're twenty again, and replace all your hardware with regular meat. Yet, I do not think I could function without it or at least feel whole. Strange isn't it? They say that you lose the essence of your humanity when you go under the knife, yet I would be empty without my chrome. I love the peace and serenity of the mountains, but my paranoia and habits are too ingrained to change that drastically. Another factor for not replacing my wires was the lack of funds. It took most of my cred to get out of the scene. I have a few store houses set up in case the world decides to become uncooperative, but years later I am in the thick of it again, because of a hardware glitch.

I was on the interstate rolling back into the hazy ever-present mists of Seattle. The trip was very long and monotonous. The "Spirit of Bach" compilation loaded into the sound system piped away offering little

distraction from the heavy weight of my thoughts. I was really apprehensive about coming back to town, knowing that I have to try and find someone from the past to try and negotiate a way into a clinic. My hardware was much more complex than the local street doc could patch up. If I Walked into a hospital, it would have lead to me being reported to the rent-a-cops. The problem when you're state of the art, is that either someone owns you, or someone is looking for you.

When I regained consciousness I was screaming. My entire nervous system was wracked with painful jolts of electricity. I made sure that the autopilot was running when I left in case it happened again. The clock in the dash HUD said 18:23. I was out for 7 minutes. I am not sure how it started or why, all I do know is that the pain is so intense that I pass out. I kept losing consciousness for longer periods of time with each episode.

The car was parked across the street from the New Covenant Church in Auburn. The neighbourhood is completely run down and buildings are decaying. As the pain subsided, and my vision cleared, I quickly surveyed the street. "Better to be paranoid than dead", I breathed. I flipped through different optical modes and looked for anything that could be a threat. Sidewalk, street, and sky are clear of visible danger. I grabbed my old Ares predator 2 off the seat beside me. The leather concealable holster, worn with time and stained with sweat was a little tight. After I adjusted a few straps, it managed to fit comfortably.

I slid the gun back into its old housing. The weight brought back a sense of security, like cuddling up to an old lover. I reached for my ragtag canvas armoured jacket. I was not even sure if the style was anything you could currently find any place but an old thrift shop. As I opened the door, I donned the jacket, and shifted the plates to where they would provide the most protection. It also seemed to be a little tight around the torso and my mid section, but it would have to do for a while.

Casually I scanned the area for gutter punks and security cameras, as I made sure to look both ways before I crossed the street. The two cameras mounted into the stone of the parapets of the church keep a watchful eye on the locals.

I was cursed at myself for passing out. I wanted to slowly case the area, and sneak in through the side entrance. Now, I had with no choice but to announce myself by going through the front door.

"Back on the scene a few hours and already I have reverted back into a world class amateur." I thought.

I was aware that I was a little too hard on myself, but only routine and paranoia kept me alive. So many people in the underworld want to make a name for themselves and end up toe tagged instead.

Slowly, but with measured steps I moved to the large wood finished doors of the building. I slipped my right hand into my pocket and withdrew the little silver cylinder stashed inside. A drawn gun would be completely inappropriate, but few can tell the difference between a lethal monowhip and a credstick at a glance.

The marvels of technology still amazed me. Millions of carbon atoms strung in a single strand so thin and strong that it can basically sever anything in its path was a miraculous feat completely lost on billions of people so accustomed to such technology.

As I pushed on the door with my forearm, and it gave way with a groan. I began to move carefully into the subdued lighting.

My cybernetic eyes immediately adjusted to the new lighting, compensating for the piercing beams of daylight that filter in. Often it was the little things like being able to instantly survey a room, without tracers or haloed images on your retinas that help to avert ambush and surprise.

The church has a large rectangular entryway, lined with wooden confessionals on the left, and a stand with a little bowl of water by the archway that leads into the main auditorium.

I searched quickly for any cameras, and spotted one across from the privacy booths. I angled my face away from the camera, and pretended to be interested in the scrolling work on the doors. Slowly, I moved in closer to one of the confessionals, hooked the handle with the base of the whip, pulled the door open, and walked inside.

The inside of the booth was dark, but the lowlight compensation in my eyes quickly took care of that. The tiny little room had a plastic bench, and a screen mesh that opened to the adjacent cubicle. I kept my head down mimicking a pious gesture, that shielded my face from any potential cameras within.

I sat down, and waited as my heart was pounded in my ears. I felt weakness of hunger, as my body reminded me of the extra food that my hypermetabolism demanded. I reached into my left pocket, and felt a soft dimpled orb. I pulled out the fruit from my jacket, and began to remove the fragrant rind from the tender orange flesh.

A door behind the screen slid open with a suddenness that caused my reflexes to automatically reach, withdraw, and deploy the pistol that slept in its hidden holster. As the contact on the grip synchronized with its mate in my palm, a crosshair, status, and round count popped into my vision. I flattened myself against the back wall minimizing my presence in a field of fire. The fruit landed on the floor, and I waited, finger on the trigger.

After what seemed to be an eternity, a male voice intoned, "That will not do you much good in here my friend."

I took a few deep breaths and slowed my system down. My hand shook from all of the nor-adrenaline that flooded my system to negate the surge the surprise caused.

"I am sorry." I sighed, "It's the way I am wired. It keeps me alive, but often it comes at a cost. Besides, I am using gels instead of hard rounds." I hoped that would rectify anything negative my actions might have created.

"So my friend, what can I do for you?" The voice from beyond questioned.

I put my gun back into the holster, and picked the fruit up from the floor.

"I am looking for Pastor Mattias. I have been away for a while and I would like to reach him if I can", I answered before shoving a piece of the tart fruit into my mouth. Instantly I felt as if the sugar rushed into my blood stream, refuelling my depleted body.

"Pastor Mattias is currently attending the Hermetic Development Program, at Seattle University. Perhaps I can help you in his stead," said the voice.

I was caught off guard and thought for a moment, "A man of the cloth studying the magic tradition? That seems so strange."

"I really appreciate the offer, but I was really looking forward to talking to him. Is there any way that you can get him to contact me?" I asked.

I savoured another piece of orange, and noticed the peels left on the floor of the booth. I picked them up and put them into my pocket.

"The Pastor is quite involved with his studies and in the middle of some very complex processes at the moment. If you leave your details with me, I can get him to contact you, when he has some time to spare." expressed the person beyond the screen.

I realized that I had not checked into town, and I didn't have a disposable line, I panicked, and almost choked. I would have to give out the number to one of my safe houses. I flipped through my micro-secretary, and drafted a quick note, "8765-4542-763433 - Avien." I then outputted the message onto a slip of plastic film and dropped it onto the ledge.

I learned long ago that someone with skills strong enough can track you through DNA remnants or even personal items. I was not going to take any more chances, I was currently on strike two, and the game has not even started.

"I am staying at my cousin's place for a day or so" I lied, "Please have him call me."

"I don't have his schedule my friend, I will leave a message and do what I can to have him contact you." the voice pointed out.

Although my uneasiness about not being able to explain how badly I needed to make contact with Pastor Mattias grew, I knew that I could not share that with this invisible figure. I would have to be patient and wait.

"Of course, I appreciate the help. Many thanks chummer," I said.

I stood up and kept my face pointed down toward the floor. I put my whip away, and leaned into the door so it would open. I popped the last of the fruit into my mouth, and headed toward the exit. I heard the panel slide closed behind me, as the door shut and I exited the church.

Outside the setting sun threw long shadows over the city's hazy streets. Several wage slaves meandered home on the sidewalks. A group of three gutter punks sauntered out of a building so run down that the name on the signage is no longer readable, and most of the windows have been replaced with sheets of recycled plastic chipper board.

I begin to descend down the small set of steps and cross the street to get to my car. I smiled and nodded my head to the bustling stranger on the sidewalk, who returned the gesture. As I thumbed the remote to unlock the vehicle and it started. The door slid open automatically as I approached, and I dropped into the driver's seat. I plugged in the address from my micro-secretary into the GPS system, and set the autopilot to initiate. The group punks watched as the car rolled and yelled something unintelligible as I passed.

The entire trip was a blur. The autopilot interacted with the GPS system and did most of the driving. I was so distracted by my fear of not being able to contact Mattias before something terrible happened to me, that when I had my hands on the wheel, I began to take the car off course. Thankfully the system auto corrected and just asked me if I wanted to resume control.

Twenty-five minutes later the car pulled up the curb and stopped outside an apartment building in Sumner. I snapped out of my daze, and scanned the area. The clock on the Heads up display said 19:14. Some kids played in the street. They darted behind some garbage cans, and popped up with plastic pistols and yelled bang at each other.

"Your dead. I geeked you, you fragging trog.", yelled one of the youths tucked in behind a car.

"You couldn't hit the broad side of a panzer, you poser!" cried back a hidden squeaky voice.

I smiled to myself, while thinking of the innocence of youth, as the banter continued around the neighbourhood. I imagined that I played games like

this as a kid, running, ducking and sliding behind obstacles, while firing pretend projectiles at my friends. I felt a small pang of loss for the moments and feelings that could have been. I make sure to remind myself that the past doesn't reflect who I am now, and the purposes for which I exist.

A sudden rush of soft soled footsteps behind the car quickly drew my attention. In the side mirror, two child-sized figures crouch with two hands gripping an object. Slowly they crept up to the passenger door, and one of them made a rolling motion with her left hand.

I reached under my right arm and shifted my gun in the holder so the grip touched the ends of my fingers. I lowered the tinted passenger window, and the face of a smiling girl, poked into the car.

"Hey mister, can you roll your car out slowly so that we can use it for cover?" she asked in a hushed voice.

I smiled, and snickered, then replied, "Sure I can."

"Which direction do you want me to go?" I asked.

After a pensive moment of thought, she whispered, "If you turn around, they would never expect an ambush, and it would get us closer."

"Thanks mister", she added.

I nodded, and rolled up the window. I put my hands on the steering wheel, turned on the signal and started my u-turn. As I was about to complete the turn, she and her companion popped out from behind my panel, and yelled, "Bang, bang, bang, rat-tat-tat. You're all dead, you rat faced trogs."

She danced around in a circle with her team mate, and sang, "We gacked you, we gacked you, we rule the concrete jungle."

I could not help but be amused. Her little ruse won her the day, and it also gave me a reason to move so I could go look for a better place to park the car.

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It took me twenty minutes to find a decent garage with sufficient security to deter a break in. It cost 250¥ for a week and a few minutes of walking, but it was important to make sure the Elite was safe, as it was my only ticket out of this city. It stayed in the underground parking of a decent hotel 4 blocks away, but at least there were a few routes to get there in case trouble erupted.

I decided to walk the streets as my first route to the flat. It drizzled and the humid air was warm for the month of February, but I needed to get my gear inside and check messages as soon as possible. The streets did not seem to change at all since I left. Potholes riddled the pavement, parked cars lined the curbs, and trash blew freely across both the sidewalk and tarmac.

On my way, I took a quick detour inside the local stuffer shack to pick up a pair of disposable phones and some food. There were no fresh vegetables or fruit, everything was packaged, sealed and fortified with nutrients.

I noticed as I approached the building that housed my flat, the children who were playing before were no longer present. Most of the lights in the entrance worked, and the air smelled like stagnant spicy food. The lone camera by the door had been adjusted previously by someone with a blunt instrument, so it no longer worked. I walked up to the information secretary panel and tapped it. The automated persona of the help system winked into existence, and asked if I needed assistance. I proceeded to punch in the twelve-character security code, that I was astounded I remembered.

The persona chirped, "Invalid Passcode, please try again."

After verifying the number with my pocket secretary and drawing the same result, I told the automation to lookup and dial the occupant, "Harvey Thunder." After two ring tones, a crackled male voice asked who was there. When no one responded, he cursed then hung up.

"Some squatter is in my flat", I thought, "I have been paying for 8 years, and some leech has taken up residence, and changed my codes."

I was about to exit the building when one of the kids I recognized on the street sauntered in.

"I give up", I said as I put up my hands in a gesture of surrender.

"You have me, Mr. Shadowrunner," I added.

The boy smiled a missing tooth grin, and pointed his pistol at me.

"Who won?" I asked.

"Kiara, as usual," he grumbled.

"She wins everything. No one can ever catch or surprise her, and at school she comes in first in every sport. Some people from a special school were going to try and recruit her," the little boy complained with no prompting.

He moved around me toward the panel, and punched in his code to unlock the door.

I opened the door for him, and he continued his stories detailing his friend's physical abilities, completely oblivious to the fact he just helped me out.

We walked over to the elevator, I pushed the button and we waited, as the boy recounted a story of how Kiara broke the arm of a bully 5 years older than her. I pressed the button for the third floor and he pressed 9. It was a huge relief that he was not going to get off with me. A moment later the elevator rose and stopped on the third floor.

I wished the boy luck, as I stepped out into the hallway before the elevator doors closed. Three doors down on the left was my flat, apartment 309.

I drew the predator from the holster under my right arm, synced it and placed it in my pocket. I grabbed the silencer from its slot in the holster and relocated it to my right pocket. My wired system was surging and the world slowed down to a crawl. I walked up to the door as casual as I could, and knocked. The door had an optic system that showed a full 180 x 360 degree arc of the hallway eliminating ambushes.

The same voice that I heard downstairs crackled, "Who are you?" from behind the door.

"Mr. Thunder, the bank that holds the account where the payments are withdrawn has been frozen. I will have to serve a notice of eviction if payment is not made." I lied.

"What? Are you kidding me?" the voice questioned.

"No sir, and we don't have any additional banking information to fall back on. And your lease agreement stipulates that you have 5 days to make payment."

The maglocks on the door released with a very silent click. I shoved the door open forcefully with my weight, and struck the squatter. I withdrew the gun from my pocket, and scanned the room for others. I didn't see anyone, so I carefully listened for noises not coming from a dazed lump on the floor. I levelled my gun at the lump and questioned, "Anyone else here?"

Another groan came from the figure on the floor.

"I think you broke my nose, you fragger," the man said in a voice that sounded like he was speaking into a jar.

I put my backpack onto the floor, closed the door, then removed the silencer from my pocket and screwed it onto the weapon.

"If I were you, I would be a little more polite. As you can see, I have the gun," I retorted. "Now I am going to ask you one last time, is anyone else here?"

"No, just me," he responded in a defeated tone.

I scanned the entrance, and saw only 1 pair of shoes. The figure sitting on the ground, was barefoot, but I had to make sure to cover the bases. I set the maglock, and proceeded to check the bedroom, bathroom, then kitchen of the flat as I forced him in front of me, to make sure no one else was here.

After that was completed I went and found the telecom and disconnected it. He then walked over to the kitchen sink to clean up. My squatter was a slight built man about my age, wearing loose fitting pants and no shirt. His light brown hair started to show some grey at the temples. I could see a

chrome datajack placed behind his right ear and 2 yellow chips slotted below the jack.

"You might want to put a cold cloth on your neck, and apply pressure to your nose," I told him as I walked into the kitchen and leaned against the fridge. I lowered my gun to my side, confident the place was empty and my guest was not much of a threat.

"Look man, I know how to stop a nose bleed. I have earned my share jetting around cyberspace." he quipped back.

"Is that how you found my place, and changed all my passcodes?" I asked.

"Your passcodes?!" he exclaimed.

He was starting to get angry. "You bust into my apartment, stick fragging gun in my face, then accuse me of changing your passcodes. You're an arrogant piece of drek."

I raised the gun up again, and smirked.

"Listen here, trog face, you bust open my door, break my nose and then expect me to be nice? You have a brass hoop chummer. I don't care if you have a fragging gun or not."

Something inside told me that he was bluffing, his story would not check out. His confidence looked shaky.

I stepped forward and stuck the gun under his chin.

"My name is on registry, I have transcripts from the accounts that are paying the bills and you, chummer, are lying. So tell me, how did you find this place and hack your way in here."

The extra pressure seemed to weaken his resolve a little.

He blinked his eyes and sighed.

"My cousin Cayle is the guy who set all this up for you. Uncle Flint told me about the place and gave me the codes to get in. Changing the codes is

simple if you know anything about security systems. I was between jobs and needed a place. He said I could stay here for a bit since it was unlikely you would use it."

"How long ago did you move in?"

"Almost 2 years ago. I checked the access logs, this place was only accessed twice, and those times were within the initial 6 months of the lease. I figured it was safe, and the price was right, so I changed the passcodes and settled in. I was going to change the name on the lease after a while but never got around to it," he remarked.

"Is my stash in the floorboards still here?" I questioned.

"I guess" he answered, "I never noticed one."

I stepped back and removed my weapon from his chin and motioned for him to move back into the living room, then take a seat. He followed my directions, and slumped into the couch, tilted his head back, put his arm over his eyes and sighed deeply. I walked to the corner furthest from the kitchen and moved the bookshelf away from the wall. Pulling the carpet back revealed the now slightly rusted latch in the metal lid that covered the stash.

I removed the lid from the box in the floor and pulled out the blue canvas bag. I unzipped the white plastic zipper, which revealed two bars of oricalcum, a Savalette Guardian, and four small boxes of teflon coated rounds. I rezippped the bag, closed the hole with the metal lid, replaced the carpet, and slid back the shelf. Lifting the bag produced a noticeable "clink", which seemed to wake my dozing squatter.

"So what do you have in the bag chummer? Did you find what you where looking for?" he asked.

I simply raised an eyebrow at him as I moved out from the corner. I plugged the telecom back into the wall and threw the unit at the to the lump on the couch. "Call your cousin," I told him.

"No way, why would I do that?"

"Well, if you don't I am going to break pieces of your body, as payment for all the time you leeches off of me. I want to talk to your cousin, now do it."

I kicked the small coffee table over which dumped the simrig and a number of chips onto the carpet. His eyes went wild in panic and disbelief. He jumped off the couch and lunged toward me with a clumsy desperation. I simply sidestepped the lumbering fool, grabbed his arm and swung him toward the bedroom door. He hit his temple hard on the frame and collapsed on the floor. I checked his pulse to make sure he was still alive. The beat was rapid and irregular, but still strong. I pulled the chips from the slots in the back of his head. Both chips were a translucent yellow, and had the name "Gold dreams" inscribed on the label.

I went over to the spilled pile of chips on the floor near the rig. All of the chips were the same, yellow plastic, and had matching labels. I was groaning with frustration when I realized my guest was a chip-head. I acted quickly, went to the kitchen, grabbed the reinforced tape, some silverware, and a piece of string from the drawers. A quick search of the bathroom cabinet revealed some tranq patches and a roll of gauze. I went back to the unconscious man on the floor, slapped the patches on his neck and stuffed the gauze into his mouth. I started the tape around his head to seal the gauze, then secured his wrists, and finally his ankles. I put him down on floor, flipped the couch and placed it over him to make a mini cage. I made sure he was lying on his side and tied the silverware string ensemble to the tape on his ankles.

There was a black plastic pack on the inside of the door by the maglocks, which I used to collect all of his chips and rigs. In the bedroom, there were more chips of varying colours, many of which were cracked, and another player with dual chip jacks. To my dismay, female articles lay intermingled with the mess of linens towels and other clothing on the floor.

The level of frustration I was experiencing is almost unbearable. The lack of gear, supplies and contacts, was a problem but the fact that two uninvited guests who were junkies, violated the safety of my house. Everyone knew that a chiphead was as untrustworthy as an elf or dragon.

I moved the mattress off the bed and moved it to the spot in front of the door, blocking access. I finally decided to remove my jacket, and place it over the lower half of the door, for some protection in case someone

decided to pay my guess a visit. I turned off all the lights in the apartment, and laid myself out on the mattress to rest a while. It was then I noticed the soft glow of the remaining street lights that spilled into the apartment and cacophony of sounds of the urban jungle echoed loudly from the streets below.

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I relaxed a while on the mattress and started to close my eyes when the telecom buzzed. I rolled onto the floor, stood up, and located the displaced telecom unit on the floor over by the shelf. The polymer display panel on the front of the unit had a large scratch on it, but seemed to work fine when I pressed the answer button.

"Hoi, Marty. Let us in.", the black screen demanded.

"Marty is out for a bit" I answered.

"Who the frag are you? And where did Marty go?"

"He's out" I said again, "He'll be back in two days".

"Marty had better not be out, unless you have the cred to cover the expenses." the tough guy voice threatened.

I heard some scuffling in the entrance through the comm. There was some harsh whispering, then a shaky male voice saying, "Ok, ok." The comm system buzzed for a second, then I heard the distinctive click of a door closing.

My mind raced as I realized they were coming up. I disconnected the call, ran to the door, grabbed my jacket and pistol, flipped the mattress out of the way and released the maglock. After a quick scan of the hall with the optic system to make sure the area was clear, I opened the door and moved into the hall, deliberately leaving the door open so I didn't lock myself out of the apartment. I ran down the hall past the elevator to the garbage room, and stepped inside. I took a piece of cardboard and wedged the door open. Down the hall the doors to the elevator opened, and its passengers disembarked. The group moved down the hall with jingling and clinking of chains and buckles.

“Gangers”, I thought and hoped there weren’t too many of them.

I waited till they moved down the hall, and then quickly peeked around the corner to see what I was up against. A very large troll took up the rear, and I could just barely make out two sets of legs in front of him. As I stepped out from my hiding place into the hall, I raised my pistol, targeted the back of his head and squeezed the trigger twice in rapid succession. Two small coughs of the silenced pistol sent him forward and down to the floor. The casings made two little “tink” sounds as they bounced off the wall and landed on the carpeting.

Hearing the thud, the two others whirled around and reached into their jackets. Before they could withdraw their arsenal, I targeted the pistol again and coughed a round at each of them. Both of the soft silenced rounds impacted their targets squarely in the chest, and they went down with a groan.

I moved in slowly, watching carefully to see if either of them was faking unconsciousness. As I crept up closer one of the humans started to glow faintly, I aimed and pulled the trigger again, hitting him square in the chest, where his jacket didn’t cover. The other human cringed as his companion absorbed the shot. I aimed the gun at last threat and knelt close to him. I had his full attention.

“Who are you?” I asked.

“Frag off slothead.” He spat.

I felt vulnerable out in the open and decided to not waste any more time. I reached into my cargo pants, grabbed a tranq patch, and slapped it on his neck. He started to reach for it, as I pointed the gun to the exposed part of his chest, he stopped. After 30 seconds, his eyes closed and his breathing changed. I holstered my gun then dragged the two smaller guys into the apartment at the same time by their wrists. Once inside, I quickly taped up their hands and ankles like my I did to my guest. I brought the tape out into the hallway, and taped up the big bruiser. He was almost three meters tall and had to weigh well over 400 pounds, so I taped his elbows together as an extra precaution. I walked down the hall and grabbed the condensed plastic casings from the rounds I spent, and put them into my pants pocket for safekeeping.

Dragging an unconscious troll around is probably one of the more intense workouts that someone can perform. It took me almost a minute to drag the slumbering mass the 6 meters to the inside of the apartment. Once inside, I enabled the maglock and threw the last two patches I had onto the neck of the trog. Letting someone that could snap my head off with two fingers, wake up, didn’t make any sense to me.

As they lay unconscious, I searched through each of the gangers clothing. The troll had a few chips in his pocket, chains across his chest, and a small bag of mixed pills. The spell tosser, had various pieces of jewellery engraved with strange symbols and three gold stripes wrapped around the upper left arm. I removed the HK227 SMG slung under his right arm. The last human with the tranq patch on his neck, had a bag of chips, a handful of derms, a simrig, a pocket secretary, and a rugar superwarhawk. I collected the weapons, contraband, and electronics then stuffed them into my pack.

I flipped the couch over, and pulled the spent patches off of the neck of my squatter, determined to get some answers. After moving then drenching the unconscious chiphead in the shower for several minutes, I managed to wake the sputtering and groggy trespasser.

“Enough, enough” he cried.

“Well Marty, it seems that you owe someone some serious cred, and they came to collect”

His eyes went wide with surprise. “I am not Marty. My name is Edom.”

“Then who’s Marty?” I demanded.

“Marty was my girlfriend until she started slotting black chips, and hanging out at Bathori’s Castle Club. She went to go meet some guys about 2 weeks ago and disappeared.” he explained.

“Well the three gangers that stopped in are having a nap in the living room.”

“Oh drek, no. We need to get out of here. I have no idea how much she owes, or where she is, but this means trouble.”



“There is a huge snag with that plan chummer. I am expecting a call to this number, and I have no where else to go.”

“If we don’t get out of here, we’re both gonna be recycled in the protein vats.” His eyes flickered with thought for a second. “What if I reroute the LTG to another place? Can we leave then?” he asked.

“That would be acceptable if you can guarantee security on the line. Where are you planning to route it?”

He pushed his way out of the shower, and slogged out of the bathroom in wet clothes. I followed as he rushed into the bedroom, and started rummaging through things. He slid open the bottom dresser drawer and pulled out a keyboard covered with loose wires and switches held on with tape.

“It’s not the prettiest looking rig I’ve cooked up, but it will keep your icon running as hot as anything the corps will put out. I have some really whiz utils loaded, that I managed to score from a friend of mine that will come in handy. Grab the box of chips and the fibre cables and follow me,” he said as he moved to the telecom in the living room.

I grabbed the items he asked for and placed them onto the coffee table where he placed the deck and telecom. He grabbed the three cables, plugged one end into the deck, and the other into the telecom.

“Do you want to hitch along?” he asked.

“I don’t have the hardware.” I said as I pointed to my bare temple.

He shrugged and plugged a second cable into the deck, then into the socket behind his ear. He took a deep breath, and stretched out his legs. He punched a few keys on the board, and flicked two switches.

“I am loading a few utilities, I will jump into the buildings security in a sec. Do you have another phone number I can route the calls to? You want this untraceable, right?”

I went to my pack, and pulled out the bag from the stuffer shack. I pulled out the two phones and asked, “Will these do?”

He flicked a switch on the rig, and answered, “No those will not do. They don’t have any form of encryption on them. Give me the numbers, and I will set up two temporary obfuscation matrices that will buy us a maximum of thirty seconds for each phone before we can be located. So say what you want, but say it very quickly. The number will flip from the first phone to the second after you hang up the first call.”

He punched several keys as I read him the numbers from the back of the phones, then flipped two switches, and said, “I can no longer hear you, I will be back in a few pulses. If you smell my brain cooking, dump me.”

As Edom was jetting around cyberspace, I decided to start the preparations for leaving. I went to the kitchen, grabbed several bottles of cleaners from under the cupboard, and started spraying down the surfaces of the apartment to kill as much DNA residue as possible, to reduce the chances of being tracked. I had finished spraying heavy cleaner in the bathroom and kitchen, and was starting to pack things by the door when Edom cried, “Eureka!”

“All done?” I asked.

“Yep, I also managed to score some data on Marty. I am pretty sure we can find her.”

“We?!? What do you mean we? When did I sign up to become part of a search party?” I stammered.

“Well... err... I am helping you get out of here, and uhh...” He cast his eyes down and didn’t complete this sentence.

“Get your stuff. Make sure you have everything that is important to you. We’ll stuff the rest into bags and dispose of them. I just wish we had a mage to sterilize the place. Hurry up, we have 10 minutes to get out of here.”

Edom, got up, went to the bedroom and started cramming all his clothes and gear into the 2 sport bags he could find. “Hey, where are the rigs and chips chummer?”

“I moved them to a safe place, you have 9 minutes, now move.” I ordered.

The rest of his stuff and Marty's were jammed into garbage bags, after being doused with bleach and other cleaners. Fifteen minutes later, we were packed and ready to go. We disposed of the garbage bags using the chute in the hall, and were riding the elevator down to the lobby.

"We should split up for the trip. You walk ahead and on the other side of the street. I will carry all the bags except for one so that it doesn't look like you're leaving. Do you know where the Staedler is?"

"Yep, it is about 4 blocks west."

"Great, meet you there." I grabbed the extra bag, adjusted my backpack and duffle bag to carry the extra burden. Then I crossed the street, and walked slowly so I could trail at a distance.

After two blocks of moving at Edom's really slow pace, he ran into a group of five gangers rounding the corner.

"MARTY!!" exclaimed one of the gangers, as he grabbed for the decker. "It's so good to see you. You have been avoiding us."

The group immediately encircled their quarry, trapping him in the centre.

He cast a fearful look over his shoulder in my direction, and started his fast talk. I could not hear their dialog, but after a few seconds of banter, the leader punched Edom in the head, which dropped him to his knees. Each of the gangers spat on the degraded man, and continued down the street in the direction of the flat.

Edom raised his hand to the side of his head. He slowly stood to his feet, and cast an angry look in my direction. I shrugged, and raised my palms as if to ask, what he expected me to do. We continued our migration to the Staedler on opposite sides of the street and made it without further incident. I crossed the street, and met up with him just outside of the hotel. The building was a large high rise covered with ballistic glass. Massive lights lit up the outside of the building and bounced off the reflective surface creating a glowing halo in the skyline. Two troll doormen in red uniforms flanked the entrance.

"I think we should just grab a room, stay the night, and get a fresh start in the morning. I am exhausted, and just need to wait this out." I said.

"You can go crash, I am going go down to the castle to see if I can find anything about Marty's whereabouts. You wouldn't have any spare cred on you, would you?"

"Sorry chummer, I am already way over my resource limit." I lied. I knew if I gave him any cred, he would just blow it on chipping, drugs or synthahol.

He shrugged, "A bit of mammon would have loosened a few tongues. I guess, I will just have to figure something out. I need you to take this."

Edom, put the bag down, and started walking away when I asked, "When are you going to be back?"

He stretched his arms out to the side, and answered, "Flushes me chummer. I should be back by daylight, or shortly after."

"Alright, see you then, just keep a low profile", I said as I grabbed the fourth bag.

He nodded, turned around and walked away. I walked between the two trolls, that eyed me casually but did not offer to help with the load, and passed through the automatic doors of the Staedler Hotel. The lobby was a large beige painted room, with a pair of steel elevator doors on the left and a long synthfibre counter on the right. A low pile crimson carpet covered the floor. The rest of the lobby was empty except for a few beige plastic couches huddled beside the counter and baggage cart parked in the corner. I strolled up to the counter and put down the four bags.

The young female orc jacked into the terminal at the counter asked "May I help you?"

"I paid for a weeks worth of parking and need to get a room for the night. My accommodations didn't work out."

"What size of room do you want sir."

“I will take a room with two double beds, if you have one please.”

“That will be 75¥, and I will need your slot card please.”

I handed her my credstick and slot card for the garage.

“Your room is 413 and Checkout is 11am, Mr. Kalliver.” she said as she reconfigured the card, and I punched my pin number.

She handed me back the card and stick. I grabbed the luggage cart and I loaded it up with the bags before wheeling it into the elevator. The elevator had three buttons labelled, room, pool, garage and a card slot. I inserted the card and pressed the room button, and the elevator started moving up to the fourth floor. With a metallic, “ding” the doors opened, and I pushed the cart out into the plum carpeted hallway.

A few stuffer machines were crammed into a small room opposite from the elevator, and a little brown sign indicated the directions of the different room numbers. I followed the hallway down to my room, slotted the card in the door, and the maglock released.

Using the luggage cart, I banged the door open and entered the room. It was a plain light cream room, with a beige carpet, and duvets. My eyes adjusted, so I didn't bother with the lights. A video telecom rested on the stand between the two beds. The air smelled a bit musty, but was cool because of the air conditioner. I closed the door and peeled off my jacket and clothes and climbed into bed. Exhaustion set in as I placed my pistol on the nightstand and closed my eyes. A deep sigh later, I feel asleep.

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I awoke to the muffled sound of a phone buzzing. The time on the telecom said 7:45 but it was not the source of the sound. It was coming from a phone in my jacket pocket. I hopped out of bed and snatched the phone and flipped it open.

“Hello, this is Avien.” I said into the phone.

“Good morning sunshine, this is Edom. I found out where Marty is, but I need some help to get her out.”

“I keep telling you, I can't chummer. I do not have the resources or the time.”

“We can get you some major resources if you help me get Marty back. She has a stash of cred kicking around. I love her very much and I don't want to see anything bad happen to her. The Hackers grabbed her, and are holding her ransom. They found out that she is worth more than she borrowed. Word on th...”

The line disconnected.

After 10 seconds the other phone rang.

“Drek man, sorry about that, I forgot about the fail-over. If you help me out, I will make sure you get paid well and I will owe you. I just don't have anyone else to turn too. I really need to get her back.”

I mulled the idea over, and said nothing for a while. My instincts told me I was not getting the full picture.

“Come to the hotel, we can discuss this over breakfast. I will meet you in the lobby.” I said.

“Alright!” he said emphatically. “I will be there in about an hour.”

I was starving. I opened my backpack, and rummaged around. I pulled out a banana flavoured protein supplement and tore it open. The paste was very unsatisfying but it curbed the hunger pangs.

After a shower and shave, I pulled out a fresh change of clothes from my backpack and got dressed. I grabbed the pistol from the nightstand, donned my holster and jacket then headed to the elevator.

The silver doors opened up with their token “ding”. I entered the stainless steel box, slotted my card and pressed the lobby button.

I waited downstairs in the lobby for about 15 minutes, till Edom arrived. He looked very pale, his eyes were sunken, and had black bags underneath. He was smiling, but looked a bit jittery.

“Hoi!” he bellowed.

I joined him over by the door and we walked out to the street. The sun was shining brightly through the hazy sky.

“UV index is 5, smog is 3, and temperature is 24. It’s the perfect day.” He said still smiling.

“Where do you want to go for food?” I asked.

“There’s a little dive that’s pretty quiet around the corner.” He answered.

We walked around the corner, down the side street for a block or so, and mounted two stools at the counter of a little food stall called “Tina’s Tastes”. Boiling meats and pungent vegetables saturated the air with mouth-watering odours. The little asian dwarf behind the counter, had long black hair pulled back into a pony tail, and a heavily stained apron. She dipped a spoon into one of the bubbling pots, and slurped. She smacked her lips together for a few seconds, and dumped a cutting board filled with dark red meat chunks into the pot.

“Yes, needs ritter more snake, and dash of sart.” She said in a funny Asian accent, as she grabbed a pinch of white powder from a bowl on the counter and sprinkled it into the boiling concoction.

The halfer turned and noticed us waiting at the counter. “What you have? We has snake gumbo, pigeon stew, soy noodre, curry rat, and cream of reek.”

“I’ll take a medium soy noodle and a soycaf, and my friend will have...” Edom said with a pause as he looked at me.

“What kind of snake is it?” I queried.

“It fresh boa.” she answered, “Very reen. Good meat.”

“I think I will stick with a trog-sized soy noodle and a bottle of Thermite juice.”

I was afraid to think of what the snake was raised on or how it died.

“So, I spent all night tracking Marty down” whispered Edom. “It seems that once they lent her the money, the Hackers decided to do some digging into her profile to make sure that she could return the cred. While rooting around, they found out that her parents where corp collars living in Belleview. She ran away from home and has been on the street for a few years. We’ve managed to duck the few detectives that were poking around over the last year, but apparently, those gang sloheads figured they could turn her in for a reward, and try and stick me with her debt.”

“So what’s the reward worth?” I asked.

“Her parents are willing to offer 20 K for her return. I am guessing they are holding her hostage to try and coerce a higher ransom.”

Tina placed two styrofoam containers and the two drinks on the counter. “Fifteen crams.”

Edom raised his eyebrow at me and motioned with his hand.

I slotted her the cred with a bit of a tip and slid the smaller container to Edom.

I twisted the lid off the top of the bottle of juice and drank.

“And what have you found out?” I asked.

Edom raised the cup of soycaf to his lips and sipped.

“She is being held at a ganghouse in an abandoned apartment building across town. She goes home tonight if her parents meet the 50K demand.” He explained.

“So what’s so wrong with that?”

“Well, I am not so sure that she would want to go home. And if they don’t pay, they said they will kill her.”

“That doesn’t make any sense. If they kill her they loose the 20K.”

“That is true, but it sets a precedent. The latest buzz says this kidnapping racket is going to be their new cash cow. They make sure to hit wage slaves that are not too well connected, so they don’t draw a hit squad, but are able to raise the funds one way or another.”

“Your story stinks of lies. I am out.” I said. “Something in my gut says you have been lying to me the whole time and that if I help you, I am going get hurt.”

“What? You can’t be out.”

I popped open my container of noodles.

“I can, and am. If I see you again, I am going to shoot you, and dump you on gang turf so they can finish you off.”

“Yer right. I have been lying, but consider payoff when we get her back.”

“Slags like you get good people killed. You get jazzed up on chips or chemicals, tell some lies and think you’re a hero. Then some else takes a bullet because you burn out or get sloppy. I am not taking the chance for any amount of money.”

“Look Avien, I really need this. The hackers are going to sell my organs if I don’t get the cred to pay off Marty’s debts. I know we can get her out. I’ll talk to her and see if she can pull some money out of her safety account to pay you or we can turn her over to her parents for the reward.”

“I saw what happened on the street yesterday, I know you are Marty so cut out the act. I have no ties to you, I don’t owe you anything.” I explained.

“Honest to ghost chummer, I am not Marty. Everything will be straight up from now on.”

One of the phones buzzed from my pocket. I quickly fished it out and tapped the talk button.

“Hello.” I said into the phone.

“Can I talk to Avien please?”

“This is Avien.”

“Hi, this is Rudgar Mattias, I was asked to call this number,” he explained.

“I am not sure if you remember me or not, pastor, I used to have a street name of Platinum, about 8 years ago. I used to come down to the church looking for answers. You helped me out back then.”

“Oh thank God. I have been wondering about you a lot lately. It has been a long time, what can I do for you?” he asked.

“I am not really able to talk. I can explain more later, is there somewhere I can meet with you?” I asked.

“Of course, Luc mentioned that it was urgent. I will meet you at the church in a few hours. I have some things I need to complete before I get there.”

“That’s so whizz. I will be there waiting for you. See you then.”

“Perfect. Bye now,” he said.

“Later.” I said as I hung up.

The decker’s red-rimmed eyes were glaring at me. “What was that about?” he asked with touch of irritation.

“I am going to meet a friend. I have some important business to take care of.”

“What about Marty?”

“I am not sure why you can’t seem to understand this. I am not your team mate, I am not a charity, and I can’t help you. I have my own agenda, and it doesn’t involve you.” I said in a very serious and harsh tone.

“I don’t want to die man. You have to help. I don’t have anyone else to turn to,” he said in desperation.

“You can tag along, maybe the people I am going to see might have a solution. If they don’t, you’re on your own. Eat up. Taxi’s leaving when I am done.” I said through a mouth of spicy noodles.

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We slurped up the rest of the noodles at the stall, and then took our drinks with us on route back to the hotel.

“So really, what’s your name?” I asked smugly.

“It’s really Edom,” he answered quietly. “I told you, I am going to be straight up with you chummer.”

“So why did those hackers call you Marty?”

“When, Marty and I first met, we were on the run. We got in some trouble together inside the castle, and left quickly. We were hiding from some rent-a-cops in a squat, when she started getting shaky and flipped out. She begged me to get her some BTL and some novacoke. She was crashing and really hard. So I hit the street and started looking for some sources. A group of hacks were cussing and hanging out on a corner, so I figured they were a good place to start. They told me they didn’t recognize me, and asked me my name. I panicked and spat out Marty. We negotiated a deal for a some contraband, and I went back to the squat with her score.” He explained.

“She get you slotting?” I queried.

“Well kinda. Being a button-head, I spent a lot of time jacked in, but it was one night, about a month after we met, when she came up to me with a big smile. It was the same smile she would give me when she was in the mood for action. She had a silver box, in her hands and told me she wanted to try something more intimate and powerful than sex. My heart fluttered, I was really starting to fall for her, so I agreed. She told me it was a new system she was trying out, and it would basically tailor the environment to our fantasies. We both slotted in, and when she flipped the switch it was total ecstasy. We flew, we melded, we became one intensely powerful emotion. It was unreal. I cried the whole time, just lost in the sheer overwhelming sense of it all. I have not experienced anything else like it. Anyway, after

what seemed to be an eternity, the chip burned out. It was only 10 minutes later but we were listless, and could not wait for another experience.”

“Woah, sounds intense.” I said just outside of the hotel. “Hold that thought for a few minutes, I will get our stuff, put it into the car and bring it around front. Don’t go anywhere. I mean it.” I ordered.

He nodded in affirmation as I walked between the oversized troll monstrosities that guarded the door and into the building. I waited for the elevator in the lobby for a minute with a few other patrons until the bell indicator sounded, and the doors opened. The occupants left the elevator, then we all entered, slotted our cards in turn and pressed the appropriate buttons for our destinations. After a quick ride up the elevator, I slotted open the door to my room, collected the bags on the luggage cart, and went back down the elevator to the parking garage.

The elevator finally opened up in the parking garage after stopping for passengers on each floor. The car was parked in the space close to the exit of the underground parking where I left it. It had a thin layer of soot and dust, even after such a short period of storage. After loading the bags into the car, I picked up Edom in front of the building, and headed back toward the church.

Edom was silent for most of the trip and stared quietly out the window. As we wound our way to the church he asked, “So, can I ask where we are heading?”

“We are going to a see a friend of mine.”

“I already scanned that chummer. Care to be a little more enlightening?”

“Not really. You’ll see when we get there.”

A short while later the autopilot turned the last corner before the church and slowed. The block was empty except for a few pedestrians who meandered on the sidewalks toward their destinations. I guided the car up to the curb to park in the same spot as I had the last time and turned it off. Edom scanned the street, and a puzzled look flashed across his face. The sun glazed through the haze above the city. The tan brickwork of the church

stood out in stark contrast against the grey plasticrete sidewalks and buildings.

“This it?”

“Yah this is it. It’s really important that you just listen and don’t say anything, understand?” I asked, as I stepped out of the car.

“If it means finding Marty, you can call all the shots.”

“Good. Lets go.”

We crossed the street, walked up the steps and slid inside. Streaked shafts of coloured light filtered through the stained glass and illuminated the interior of the church with a warm yellow light. I angled my shoulders and faced away from the camera mounted in the entryway, and walked across the room into the sanctuary. This was a large chamber lined with wooden panels, it contained many rows of wooden pews and had a high vaulted ceiling. A plexiglass pulpit rested on a carpeted stage centred under a large white cross at the front of the chamber. We walked across the back, then down a few rows, sat down and waited.

Edom pulled out a fibre cord, plugged one end into the datajack behind his ear and the other into his it into a miniature port on his watch.

“What are you doing?” I queried.

“I am just going over some code I wrote for a new utility.”

“What the heck do you have running that watch?”

“I scored this from a lab against Shaiwise a few months ago. It has the horsepower of a Cyber-3 deck packed into a watch. I can only load a few utilities at a time but if I am stuck in a tight place, but it’s much safer than decking naked.”

Edom slid a few golden chips from the slots in the back of his head, and plugged them into an adaptor he pulled out of his pocket. He slid the adaptor into a port on the watch and zoned out.

I was lost in thought, when a side door opened and roused me from my stupor. A thin man dressed in tan pants and a grey turtleneck shirt, with short-cropped salt and pepper hair stepped through the opening and walked toward us. I stood up and shuffled around Edom to meet the man at the end of the isle. As he drew closer I put out my hand for him to shake. Instead the slightly shorter man reached around me and squeezed me in a firm bear hug.

“The prodigal son has returned. It is so good to see you again.” Mattias said. “I have not heard from or of you in such a very long time, I was sure that you had died.”

I was taken by surprise. I was not expecting such a warm reception.

I gathered myself quickly and said, “I managed to buy some land, and find some peace and relax for a few years. It took a king’s ransom, but I managed to make a clean exit.”

“Let’s find some place a little more private to talk. Will your friend be ok here by himself or should I ask someone look after him?”

After a moment in thought I whispered, “He is in trouble. He has a chip problem, and a girlfriend stuck in a precarious situation because of it. If you can get someone to talk to him, he might get the help he needs, but remember he’s a chiphead so he tells more lies and half truths than a dragon.”

“Scanned and Logged. I will ask Luc to look after him. He has been dealing with BTL and other addictions for years. Come, we can talk more in my office.”

I followed Mattias as we walked through several creaky hardwood hallways of the church and into his office. It was a large room that measured five to six meters long and two of the four walls were completely lined to the ceiling with books. A lavish dark stained desk, filled the centre third of the wall across from the doorway. Behind the desk, two stained glass windows, one depicting a man with several children gathered around him and the other with the same man standing in a boat before a crowd of people on the shore, glowed with a penetrating light.

Mattias closed the door, crossed the room, pressed a button on the telecom and spoke into the air, “Luc, there is someone in the sanctuary that needs a chat.”

I walked along the bookcase on the right wall, and scanned the various titles on the shelves. Most of the books were sermons and teaching books from the last century, but a few were university textbooks on the subject of magic studies.

“Avien. Come. Sit.” Mattias said as he disconnected his call. Luc, has agreed to talk to your friend, and I have cleared my calendar for a few hours. Tell me, what brings you back into town. Surely it’s not my book collection that has lured you back.”

“As many questions as I do happen to have for you about your collection, you’re right, it’s not why I came back. I have a problem with my hardware. Every couple of days, I pass out, and wake up on the ground screaming from the pain. It is rather specialized and I can’t get it serviced at a regular Doc Wagon. I don’t know where to turn. Everyone I knew has either died or changed their contact information.”

The pastor’s eyes glazed over and he looked at me.

“I see.” He affirmed.

“You can see what is wrong with me, just like that?” I asked with a touch of fear.

“No, I meant, now I see why you were stressed. You hide it well but when you have been reading auras for as long as I have, you learn to notice the little things. There’s nothing wrong with your meat, so it must your chrome that’s geeked. Unfortunately, I can’t tell what’s wrong, we’re going to have to get you to a tech.”

After a long moment of silence, he shook his head and said, “I still can’t believe that you’re back. You were just gone and didn’t leave a trail to follow, and now you are back in the flesh.”

“To be candid, I am afraid that I don’t understand the strong sentiment. I came here a few times and contributed but I never really became involved here.”

Mattias cast his eyes down and sighed. He was silent again while he visibly considered something.

“Give me another moment,” he said decisively, as he started tapped some keys on the console built into the desk.

I paced in front of the bookshelf, carefully trying to dig up all of the memories I had relating to the church. I was positive that I had only been in contact with the church after several years of running, and even then it was just to be absolved of past deeds.

“Please, come with me.” Mattias spoke, as he moved toward the door. “I need to explain some things to you.”

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We exited his office and meandered through the church till we came to a steel door with a retinal scanner and keypad mounted on the wall. He pressed his face up to the reader then punched an eight-digit sequence into the keypad. The metal door retracted into the wall. We then proceeded into a sterile room that smelled of ozone, and illuminated by a sodium light. Shelves filled with numerous scrolls and texts, sealed in plastic containers lined the room. In the centre of the room stood a single screen and a computer terminal.

Mattias crossed the room and logged into the terminal through the keyboard. He navigated through a few menus and switched to voice recognition.

“Omega, please bring up the 4 horseman presentation.”

“File loaded,” a resonate voice projected into the room.

“Display presentation on screen.” Mattias commanded.



A series of holographic projections of the inside of a clone growth lab, cycled in turn. A holographic scan of a team of engineers stood frozen in place as Mattias told the computer to pause.

“Recognize anyone?” he questioned.

As I looked closer at the image, I recognized 2 people, Mattias and myself.

“That’s you,” I said as I pointed to a younger version of the pastor. “And that looks like me, but I don’t remember any of this.”

“You’re right about me. Notice my age in the holo. But that is not you. That man is a little older than you.”

“Is this my father?” I asked with an unexpected anticipation. A sudden flood of conflicting emotions knotted my stomach.

“Woah, hold on, you’re jumping way ahead of yourself here. He is not your biological father. He is your DNA template.”

“What??” I blurted with confusion.

“Sit down and relax for a second. What I am trying to explain is complicated and will take a while to get through.”

“In the barest of terms, you are a clone, but more than a clone. You were a genetic experiment that spiralled into new territory. Originally you were cloned from Gerhart Schull’s DNA. He himself was a designer baby, modified by his father Wolfgang Schull. He proved to have the heartiest, most resilient sequences. We started out with fifty samples. We managed to get twelve to the full maturity stage. Once the growth stage was complete, eight of them died within a month. We watched helplessly as their auras just faded. We gave them every bit of medical expertise we could at the time, but there was nothing wrong with them physically. The other four were awakened, and brought out of stasis, but were violent and primal savages. They grabbed what they wanted, proved to be sexually aggressive, defecated themselves like babies. After two months, we began to monitor them astrally. It seemed that some spirits took possession of the bodies. We brought in an exorcist from the church and had them dispatched but the clones died within days.”

“Ok wait a minute! This just seems a little too far fetched. And furthermore, if all the clones died... then how am I here? “

“After the first set of clones died, we tried seven more times. Each time we learned a little more about why the clones were dying. It turns out that there are a couple of problems with cloning. One is that memories are not transferred through genetics, so there is no way to transfer experience from the template to the clone. To counter this we implanted datajacks into the clones after the cerebral cortex was formed. We were then able to channel sensory input through to the subject cybernetically. We used the time control features of virtual reality to pack ten years of perceived time and experiences into the four-month period.

The second problem is obscure and relates to the aura. For some reason a clone’s aura is significantly weaker than the template’s aura, but wanes completely once the growth process is complete.

During your growth process, Gerhart was driving to the lab, and was assassinated by a group of shadowrunners. There were three of us working in the lab that night, one of whom was a mage we had called in to consult on the fading auras. At 11:20, she was observing your auras when she noticed them surge unaccountably. After we received the news of Gerhart’s death we concluded that the surge had to be the result of Gerhart’s aura joining those of the clones. The consultant concluded that if we gave enough of ourselves to you, it would make your auras strong enough to be anchored the 4 remaining clones. We agreed to the cost, and each of us gave a portion of ourselves to the process.”

He lifted his shirt to reveal a hideous scar across his abdomen.

I urged him on saying, “I don’t understand.”

“In order for our auras to strengthen yours, we had to draw our blood so the mage could transfer our life energy to you. When the ritual was completed, we collapsed to the floor from exhaustion. At the end of the growth process you and your three brothers awoke, and for the first time the life forces never faded.”

For the next 2 years you were carefully monitored magically and technically. You all managed to outperform your template in every capacity, but you each had a strong penchant for violence. The program was in jeopardy, so the chief administrator decided that it might be a good idea to enrol the team in desert wars. You joined a mercenary outfit, and were dubbed the four horsemen.”

“Computer, load file four horsemen desert wars,” He commanded.

Terrible and gruesome images of death and battles filled the room.

I reeled with the overwhelming sense of being betrayed. My entire life was a complete fabrication. I was a horrendous monster inside, had committed atrocities, and some how within depths of my being, I knew it was true.

“Avien, you must know the rest of the story. What you have heard doesn’t reflect on who you are now.”

“Why are you doing this to me? How come I don’t remember any of this?” I cried as I sank to the floor.

“Let me finish. I will explain what happened next.”

He continued, “You and your brothers were almost celebrities during the wars. The company decided to invest money into cyberware to help ensure your survival. It was extremely economical since you were all the same DNA type. Regrowing limbs and organs was very simple since one clone could potentially supply replacement parts for all of you. Now typically a corporation would just dispose of damaged assets but since your band was so popular, they would rent you out to the highest bidder, and the price of repair justified the expense. A rival corp decided to sabotage the crew. You were sent in to clear out a building that was rigged with explosives. When you and your brothers were inside, the whole building detonated. Ramus and Julian were killed instantly. You and Luc managed to survive but sustained serious head injuries.

I was starting to develop a conscience and no longer able to hide behind the guiltless mask of scientific process. I couldn’t stand the corporate intrigue sacrificing the lives of those I spent my own life force to save. I saw you as my children and decided to get you out.

I contacted a mage friend of mine named Kale, that I knew in my university days. He went to work for the star after finishing school, as a combat mage for a heavy response team. A while later he decided that didn’t fit his lifestyle and turned to freelance work. I managed to get in contact with him and arrange an extraction. Once you and your brother had recovered from your injuries, the team penetrated the facility, pulled the three of us out, and made it look like we were killed in the process by blowing up the lab. Afterwards we found refuge in this church. Several months of reprogramming in a virtual environment curbed your brother’s violent tendencies and locked away his recollection of the past, but, for some unknown reason, you didn’t react well to the process and it wiped your memories. This was about that time that the church became aware of my activities and informed me that programming an individual’s personality was unethical. They demanded that I either release you, or lose asylum.

I decided to seek guidance. I prayed. I prayed harder and with more fervour than I have ever prayed before. Then a voice spoke to me. It said that if you love something, let it go. I knew then what I had to do.

I managed to build some vague memories and persona through the VR rig. Again I turned to Kale who procured a fake ID, set up a residence, set you up with a job, since that was the only line of work you seemed suited too. I felt so guilty, but I prayed for you every day. When you came strolling into the church several years later, I knew my prayers had been answered. Somehow, God took care of you.”

“You dumped me? You... you... you just wiped my memories, and dumped me? Are you sick? You think that just because I survived that absolves you?” I yelled.

He lowered his head in shame.

“You’re right, I just dumped you. I gave you what little could and abandoned you, but you have to understand that it was a leap of faith. I really knew deep in my gut that it was the right thing to do. I didn’t understand it, but I had no choice. What else could I do?” He raised his head pleading with his eyes.

“You could have given up asylum and taken care of your son.” I bit back as I stood up.

“It wasn’t safe for any of us to be outside of the church’s protection. You had the best chance of surviving outside because you didn’t have the memories to incriminate you. I’m truly sorry, you have to believe me.”

“Sorry!?! All you have to say is sorry? Why did you even bring this up?”

“I don’t expect your forgiveness or absolution. I dredged all this up, because I thought that I owed it to you. Because I wanted to be free of this terrible burden, and because you need to know that there are certain places that you cannot go. In spite of the situation, I care for you like a son. You may not be of my flesh, but you are of my spirit.”

“What about the rest of your spirit? Where is my brother? How have you treated him all these years?”

“Luc is your brother. He works here and is very proficient with ministering to those with BTL addiction. Shortly after you left, he formed a very nasty habit. He hid it from me for months. Some of the youth he was working with gave it to him and it hooked him badly. We managed to work through that with time, prayer and love.”

“Does he know about the four horsemen?”

“No. One of the pastors recommended that we tell him that his memory was erased by his BTL habit. He lives from day to day free of the past, but still manages to pay the debt he doesn’t know he owes. I am sorry that your cross is so much heavier.”

I just stood there motionless. I was at a complete loss for words.

“We should get out of here,” Mattias suggested. “I’ll ask someone to shut things down. You must be starving. As I remember you required a lot of food.”

“Yah, I am not feeling like it now, but I guess I should get something soon.” I responded.

“Right. After you.” He said, motioning to the door.

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As we went passed through the sanctuary to leave, neither EDOM nor Luc were anywhere to be found. When I asked about them, Mattias just raised his hand and said that now was not a good time.

After a quick discussion, we decided it would be best to head to the university so that someone in the medical faculty could take a quick look at me. We swung by the cafeteria for some soy burgers and nutri-fries, before enduring the poking, prodding and diagnostics.

Mattias and I wandered the campus till we found a building with a 10 meter white marble statue of a dragon out front. It was partially dissected, showing the bones and several large organs. We entered the main hall, navigated up a flight of stairs and down a couple of long hallways till we reached our destination outside the doctor’s office. Mattias knocked on the door and opened it. Inside, a rotund man of Japanese or Hawaiian heritage in his late fifties looked up from a pile of charts. He stood up and come over to us before clasping our hands in a chubby fingered handshake. The man wore a white lab-coat with a stethoscope in the breast pocket, over his dark slacks and a yellow button up shirt.

“Welcome, I am Dr Miramoto,” said the portly figure.

“Thank you for seeing us on short notice, this is my friend Avien, whom I told you about.”

“Ah yes. I am always glad to help out. I don’t have a lot of time between classes, follow me to the examination room.” He beckoned at us as he moved past us out the door.

We moved down the hall to a door that lead into a white room with only half walls and glass panes to allow the viewing theatre to see the proceedings. He patted the white padded exam table.

“Remove your shirt and any metal on your person and hop up.” The doctor instructed as he touched a screen console.

I removed my jacket, shirt and belt, then laid across the table. He approached the table and waved a palm-sized scanner a few inches above the surface of my body till he found the induction pad of my smartlink. He smiled a full grin and winked before walking to a cabinet to fetch something wrapped in a mess of wires.

“I could not see anything on the scanner, lets see what your system says” he said as he unravelled wires wrapped around a silver box. He slid the induction pad end of the cord into the palm of my hand, and plugged the another cord into the panel he previously configured. The crosshairs of my smartlink appeared on my retina. The word diagnostics blinked where the ammo count normally appeared and the console flashed with data.

A low whistle came from the doctor. “Wow, milspec.” He marvelled.

Then everything went black.

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I was extremely groggy when I awoke to a constant beeping, and a strange sucking sound. I knew I was awake in a foggy consciousness but I could not open my eyes or move.

“What if they thought I was dead, and I am buried, unable to move or scream to tell them I am alive. Or worse yet, just a brain and spinal cord, floating in a jar” I thought.

Panic and dilution gripped my mind. The frequency of the beeping sped up as I yearned and struggled to manipulate some part of myself, or feel something. After a few minutes of struggling and panic, I began to feel dizzy. The beeping started to slow, and the dizziness went away. There was a click and then some shuffling. Unable to move, or cry out, I started to panic, and the beeping increased again. The sound of groaning furniture protested from the world beyond me. A few ill-timed beeps put an end to the constant rhythm that was the only input into my existence. Dizziness encircled my brain again.

“Hey omae, just relax.” A male voice spoke from beyond.

The driving horror of being trapped poisoned my mind. I needed to scream, talk, cry, or somehow pierce the nothingness. Reason and control slipped from my mind, and everything including the darkness and sucking sound went away.

The second time I awoke, I was more aware and could now feel my face. The beeping was back again accompanied by the strange sucking sound. The world was still completely black. The skin of my face and eyes were heavy and felt like they were drooping. I couldn't feel or move any of my extremities. When I tried to move my mouth I found had something large and solid resisting me. I tried to swallow but could not feel anything past the back of my tongue.

“Back so soon? You're a fighter that is for sure. Take it easy this time, I want to explain some things before you get too tired again,” said a voice from the darkness. “You needed surgery to repair some neural damage you sustained. You have been on various inhibitors so that your system can repair itself. Your spinal cord has been blocked at the brain stem so that you do not overtax your system, and it can heal. After a few days they will remove the block, and you can start your recovery, although it will be quick since Mattias has been praying for healing. You should rest as much as you can.”

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The dull ache from too much bed rest greeted me as I awoke out of a long slumber. My mouth was very raw, hot and dry, which paled when compared to my throat when I swallowed. I was shrugging the stiffness from my neck and shoulders when I realized I could feel and move my whole body. I would have let out a yelp of excitement, but it was caught in a fit of coughing, as I croaked with my dry throat. I reached up to my face and felt some carefully wrapped bandages.

“Welcome back to the land of the living, where the state of the art, has you outdated as soon as your scars have healed,” a familiar yet unrecognizable voice said.

Unable to speak or see the owner of the voice, I made a drinking motion with my hand in front of my face.

“Yes, yes, you're quite right, my friend, I will get you some water.”

After a few minutes a straw was poked through the bandages to my lips. I sucked the small cup dry, and motioned for more.

“That’s all for now my friend. We don’t need you throwing up and putting undue pressure on your system.”

I croaked out a small groan, now that I was not so parched.

“It’s only been a week since your nervous system was basically dissected and refurbished. Which is not a small feat according to our hosts. Even though you have had the best magical care that our church could offer, you need to take things slowly. The doctor will be along this afternoon to check in on you and remove some of your dressings.”

“Church huh? How are they involved in this?” I questioned.

“We aren’t really. The good doctor was explaining that you need to stay in the hospital as long as possible, when Mattias offered healing services as trade for some of the costs, as well as a way to speed your recovery. He is off performing some duties now, and asked that I sit and watch over you till he gets back.” The voice explained.

The sound of footsteps outside the door was followed a soft knock which echoed in the tiny room.

“Is he awake?” the question came from the direction of the knock.

“Yes Mattias, and very thirsty.” I piped.

“Well then, we’ll call the doctor to have a good look at you, then see what we can do about getting out of here.”

Mattias left for a few minutes, then came back with Dr Miramoto.

“Do you feel any pain?” the doctor began.

“Just dull aches.” I responded.

“Alright then, let’s start by removing the bandages, and turning on your eyes.”

The scissors were cold against my skin, and cut through the thick bandages quickly. I discovered that my head was shaved when the bandages removed.

“Very nice work, I must say. No scarring. The skin isn’t even pink.” Mattias admired.

“That my good friend is because of the magical healing,” the doctor explained.

The doctor put a thumb on my right lower eyelid, a forefinger on the top, and forced my eye open as he inserted something over top of the eye, and held it there. A second later a single point of light hovered in the center of my vision.

“You should see a small white dot.” The doctor spoke.

“I can, but only in my right eye.” I responded.

“Good,” he affirmed as he withdrew a black cylinder from in front of the eye, and proceeded to activate the other eye. “Now, you have newer and clearer lenses. Can you read this?” he said as he handed me a piece of plastic.

I zoomed my optics in, amazed with the clarity. The focusing made me a little dizzy. The plastic was laser etched with the words, “Congratulations, on purchasing Nikon lenses.” After a few adjustments with the cylinder my new vision was working much smoother than before.

The doctor continued his examination by poking my skin, and using electrodes to make the various muscles in my legs and arms twitch. When he triggered my wires, the world slowed down to a crawl. I forgot how much I missed my edge. My limbs moved like liquid, smooth and effortlessly.

“Your new wires are quite different from your old system.” Miramoto explained. “They have been customized and integrate much better with your CNS. Also several enhancement modules have been placed in your system

to give you an even greater edge. There is also a step system, for you to control how much edge your wires give you.”

“I have been riding the edge for my whole life, why would I want to lose it?” I asked.

“It is a standard safety measure, you can choose to never use it of course.” he responded as he cut away the rest of the bandages around my chest and pulled off the electrodes. Methodically he removed the last of the bandages and the various draining tubes from my body. The doctor brought around another silver box with the strange adaptor for my smartlink.

“Hey doc, this isn’t going to zap my chrome again is it? It was the last time I saw one of these in your hands it put me here.” I pointed out.

The fat man laughed.

“It was actually just a stroke of luck that it happened then. I was able to figure out what was wrong with you. But to answer your question with a word, no. This is just a diagnostic tool.” He said as he pressed the palm piece into my hand.

My trusty but simple cross hairs had been replaced, with a more elaborate targeting system, which had two linear scales intersecting. The word diagnostics flashed in the corner of my vision, then the system went through various targeting exercises. Trajectories and firing lane outlines in arcs and points rendered and disappeared from my sight.

“Looks like you are ready to go. We were being overly cautious, in case we missed something, but you have healed remarkably well,” Miramoto said as he rested the diagnostic equipment beside a pile of stained bandages. “You can pick up your warrantee papers, NDA, maintenance brochures, and employment contracts at the front desk. I am sure that you will absolutely love your upgrades.”

“Employment... upgrades... What? Mattias, what’s going on?” I searched his face for an explanation.

“I’ll explain on the ride home. Thank the doctor, and let’s get going,” the clergyman said as he shrugged off the question and started to collect my things from the storage closet.

“I am not leaving till I know what you got me into. Great Ghost Mattias, every time I am near you I get slotted over,” I croaked.

Mattias winced noticeably at the comment, and put down the clothes he was holding. He bit his lower lip as he tried to find the right words.

“Hey, that’s no way to treat someone who fixed you up with a new CNS, I don’t care how chipped you are.” The doctor interjected as his ever-present smile disappeared, then waved a stern hand in my direction. “You had a one way ticket to being bagged and tagged. A month left, tops, before your hardware fused and left you twitching and drooling on the plasticrete. Get your equipment and buzz before I decide to take my parts back, without using anaesthetic. You scan?”

I nodded slowly, in agreement, and the doctor’s smile returned.

“Good” he said as he and turned, bowed and left the room.

The moment hung awkwardly in the air till Mattias broke the silence. “Come Luc, let the man get dressed in private. We will wait for you by the nursing station Avien.”

I rose out of bed, and stepped on the cold marble floor. I took the pile of freshly cleaned clothes from the foot of the bed where Mattias had put them, and moved into the bathroom. There was a shower in the tiny cubicle, with the toilet and sink crammed next it. It was very small but an efficient use of space that smelled strongly of disinfectant. I was thankful that I didn’t have to take a leak, because that part of me was tender from the tube that was withdrawn minutes earlier. After I showered and towelled off, I found my clothes a little looser fitting than I had weeks before.

I collected the rest of my gear in a small dufflebag, and made my way to the nursing station to sign out. Luc and Mattias were in a hushed conversation in the waiting room near the exit. I approached the nursing station and a woman sporting the latest styles of cosmetic modification smiled and helped me to sign out of the hospital’s care. She had me sign several

contracts and documents, then returned my weapons. I said thank you then approached the two men, who looked up and let their conversation drop.

As they stood up, I said, "Look Mattias, I'm sorry. I am so unbelievably stressed, and I reacted poorly."

He looked me in the eye, slapped my shoulders with his hands and smiled. "It's alright. Let's go get some food. We can sit and clear our heads."

We walked outside were headed toward the taxi stand.

"Uhm... where's my car?" I asked with a sinking feeling in my stomach.

"Traded. Along with the bars you had" Mattias said with a very heavy sigh, wincing against an expected verbal barrage.

I cupped my forehead and started rubbing my temples. "Arrhhh..." I spat out between clenched teeth.

"I know you had to Mattias, I am not angry, but it is still frustrating. Did you remove my gear from the trunk at least?"

He nodded, and smiled a meek smile as a taxi pulled up and it's rear door swung open. We piled into the car. Mattias stuck his credstick into the slot, and directed the cab to go.

The cab ride was silent as we watched traffic and buildings scroll by. We all knew better than to blab about biz where electronic ears are most certainly to pick up a conversation.

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The next few days went quickly as we spent the time moving from one coffin motel to another after we were evicted. The church could not condone a relationship with their staff and prominent megacorp even if it was not publicized. After Mattias disclosed the situation at the hospital, the board explained that it looked like they were operating a front instead of a legit community outreach.

Work didn't take long to find us. Two days after we were asked to not come back to the shelter, a file appeared on Mattias' pocket secretary with instructions to meet at a small outdoor burger joint in the downtown. It was

from an old contact of his and he was not willing to go into more detail, so we let it slide.

Luc and I arrived a fifteen minutes before the meet, in order to case the park, and setup a good vantage point. We went up to some of the hot meal vending machines punched up two lunches, pretend to be talking about the latest season of desert wars. We meandered around casually till we found a place with a decent view. As we sat on a stoop of a run down electronics shop, we let our conversation shift to sports. It was obvious that at least two teams of security were sent to do the same thing we were doing, taking up position that would allow them to see the eating area but allow them quick access to the action if the need arose.

Mattias walked up the street ordered two beef flavoured soydogs from a kart perched on the sidewalk. He continued on to a plastic table and sat himself down. Within a minute a tall amerindian woman with long pointed features, sun weathered skin, and long flowing black hair, approached, and sat next to him. She smiled and slowly intertwined her arm in his and planted a kiss on his cheek. They kept their faces very close together, smiling and staring into each other's eyes, as a new flirtatious couple would while they conducted their meeting. It was a great cover, one that must have been practiced before. After a few minutes, the woman looked at her watch and gasped as if she was late for another meeting. She stood, thanked him, and gave him a quick peck on the cheek again as she began to move down the street.

The mage sat for a while and watched her pass through the crowd, then shook his head as he stood. He tossed the mostly uneaten meal to the flock of ever present gulls perched just out of reach, and strolled down the street leaving the birds to fight over the food. We watched and waited to see if anyone would follow. Luc got up, shook my hand, waved a short goodbye as he sauntered off in a direction perpendicular to the path taken by Mattias. I manipulated the food in my dish back and forth for a minute or so, then walked a few blocks in the opposite direction then snagged a cab back to Renaissance.

Renaissance was a classy place well known to mid-level corporate execs. The walls and tables were loaded with more electronics countermeasures than a presidential limo. The food was over priced, the holoflicks were dated, but you didn't have to worry about getting a table if you knew the

right people. Salem was always a strong negotiator and good looking face who could twist every last ounce of cred out of a Johnson. Now he was the owner and maitre-de of Renaissance. I slid inside the door, and gave a quick nod to the ever present Salem standing behind his podium. A holographic woman in a traditional kimono appeared in front of me and bowed. Her arm swung toward the interior and she motioned me to follow.

She floated eerily along the floor, as we passed isolating booths that kept their occupants well shielded from prying eyes. We negotiated the maze until the hologram stopped in front a booth. I walked through her, a weird feeling that felt unnatural, and saw the table where Mattias, Luc, and Edom sat.

“What’s he doing here?” I asked pointing toward Edom, as I sat down beside Luc.

“We are going to need him on this one. I don’t have a long list of deckers at my disposal, and I don’t think you do either” replied Mattias.

“I’m much better than anyone you would know. Besides, I need the money to pay off Marty’s debt.” Edom piped.

“Fine, then just make sure you stay clean, and keep your mouth shut. It’s not just your hoop on the line now.” I retorted as I wagged a finger in his direction.

“Stop it you two. You can argue after we go through the details.” Mattias spoke, as he withdrew a chip from his pocket and slipped it into his pocket secretary. He flipped on the holographic projector, and started the brief. A logo for a company named “Axon” appeared, and rotated in the middle of the projection.

Mattias began, “Mrs Johnson, has an acquisition and sabotage operation for us to perform. A rival company of hers, Axom, is about to announce the release of their cybernetic mnemonic storage module. If this makes it to market, the loss to her company will be massive. The objectives are to retrieve a prototype and insert blow code to wipe the schematics.”

The mage punched a few keys on the holo projection unit, and the display changed to a satellite view of the Axom building in Belleview. It was a

large eye shaped building situated on a pie shaped lot. A few more taps of keys changed the topographical view into a 360 degree view of the building.

“This is our target. It’s a three story building on the fringes of Belleview. There is a high perimeter fence topped with monofilament wire. On the roof of the building are several sentry guns programmed to fire on anything inside the fencing that’s not carrying an ID tag.” Mattias continued as he tapped another key, and a floor plan replaced the building before us. “During the day, there are 3 guards on site, and the vibration sensing system is deactivated, but the cameras are always blinking. At night, there is a single guard, a security mage, a few elementals, and the activated sensors. They hold a level 2 contract with Knight Errant.

The target is a piece of tech, stored here in this vault on the third floor. So with this in mind, lets pitch some ideas.”

“Is there a way that we can enter the compound disguised as a delivery?” Edom asked.

“All deliveries are scheduled a week in advance, and nothing gets us close to the third floor. They have four cameras setup redundantly in the loading dock, and it is sealed with a double set of maglocked doors.

“What about sniping the sentry guns, and dropping in from above?” Luc asked.

“That might work, but the odds are, that it will throw an alarm before we could even touch down.” Edom countered. “I could try hacking into their system from the matrix, but it’s a lot easier if I can do it from the inside. The security will be running in a subsystem behind a few choke points. To bad I can’t just teleport into some utility closet.”

“Mattias, can you use an elemental to dig a hole or something, so we can enter through the sewers?” I asked.

“That might work” Luc responded, “if Edom can snatch the sewer plans from the city, then we can decide on the best point of entry. We can enter from a few blocks away minimizing the risk of being seen.”



“Well, that seems like a good place to start. I will contact a fixer and see if we can get the supplies we need, to make this happen. Gentlemen, time to make up a shopping list.” Mattias added.

We sat around for another twenty minutes listing every gadget we could ever possibly want, then started to pare it down to reduce expenses. We decided to order a set of form fitting body armour, an armoured jacket, combat boots, radios, assault rifles with grenade launchers, and a narcojet pistol for each of us. Mattias also had his fixer dredge up a few flashpaks, three sets of targeting goggles, a half dozen concussion grenades, and a box of ammo. The orders would have taken a week to come in, but we haggled a little, and for a few thousand cred, we managed to shorten the delivery to tomorrow.

After our orders were in, Edom left for a few hours to pay a visit to City hall, and grab some sewer maps. The rest of us decided to take care of whatever biz we needed to, till the plans were available.

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I had just finished running through an advanced firing range simulation in the back of an Ares showroom when Mattias called and informed me that Edom was back. I paid my rental fee and slotted the attendant an extra fifty cred to charge the name on the time slot to that of a corporate slag with a membership.

The trip across the heart of the city on the maglev passed without me noticing. As the car decelerated and slid to a stop beside the platform, I followed the random currents of wage slaves commuting home from work to a local watering hole called Pappy’s.

The establishment was dimly lit by flickering neon, and lights that hung over the pool tables. An ork stood behind the bar as he stacked glasses, and refilled the flavour canisters which fed into the synthahol system. Quickly, my Nikons polarized the light, cut the glare, and zoomed in to the three figures sitting at a table in the corner. I strolled over, and stood next to the table as I gave an enquiring expression to the members of the huddle.

“So?”

“So, you would be amazed, how easy it is to get the data you need with a little social engineering, and the most basic computer skills. We have what I went to fetch, and we’ve decided on an entry point. You are behind schedule.” Edom said.

“The Maglev was held up. They waited to deploy cleanup crews for the two jumpers decided to play chicken with the train again. Ghost, I hate Mondays.” I commented.

“You would think that they would build that into the schedule by now.” Luc added.

“You can’t predict random events. Sure there are trends but you can’t always tell when someone will decide to take the easy way out of the sprawl.” Edom answered.

“Hey look at this. Mattias can you dig a 3 meter tunnel, here?” Luc asked fingering the screen on the datareader. “This looks like a small utility closet, and my guess is that there is bundle of fibre running through there somewhere.”

Mattias paused and looked at the sewer schematic and spoke, “A friend of mine teaches archaeology. We were discussing excavation methods this afternoon. He recommended a shape earth spell sustained by an elemental. It usually means the elemental goes free after, but it allows us an access.”

“Is something like that detectable?” Edom questioned.

“As long as the area is cleansed after the spell drops, we should be fine. The magic channelling does pack a punch, so I might not be a lot use if a firefight breaks out. Luckily we had some time to go over the spell this afternoon, and he had a spare formula kicking around his office.”

“So now we have a point of entry. I can get access to the fibre in the panel to hack the system from there. Then what? We still have to go up three floors.” Edom pointed out.

“Then we move down the hall, you pop open a few doors, create a few loops, and we snatch the prize from the vault.” I said.

“Woah there cowboy. I am good. And although I got jazzed up subprocessors in my brain, but there are only so many things I can hook into at a time.”

“Are you saying you can’t handle the job, Edom?” I asked flatly.

“No, I am not saying that at all, but, I am saying that a little fore-thought regarding timing, and access will help make my job easier.” He countered.

“There’s not a lot of planning to do. First we get you into the room, then you tie into the system, loop cameras and sensors based on the ten minute intrusion window, and we move into the elevator. When we are on the third floor, you jazz the maglocks and let us in. How did you want to keep the guards away from our paths?” I asked.

“Simple.” Mattias interjected, “We catch them in the middle of a shift change. I’ll phone Mrs. J. and have her get the schedule for us. Anyone caught in between, we can try and avoid with invisibility, or narcojet.”

“Alright, looks like we have a basic plan. If things go south, Edom you leave through the sewers, and we will fight our way out. Most of the time they can’t stop you since their procedures are designed to stop you from getting in, not getting out.” Luc summarized.

“If we have to abort, and find ourselves split up, meet here in three days at noon.” Mattias directed. “Once we get the schedule, we should know when we start the op. Grab some kibble, and I’ll be right back.”

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Mattias came back and we chunked our orders of artificially flavoured soy products. We reviewed guard rotation schedule, and picked 6:20pm, ten minutes before the evening switchover, as the best time to insert. If we fused things up, we would have twice the trouble to deal with, but the odds were that security would be itching to get off shift and less likely to be roaming the halls.

Our ragtag group piled into a green van, that Luc had borrowed earlier in the day. Each of us ran through the timelines, and memorized the floor plans and sewer maps we had been provided.

As we rolled up to the rear of Taku’s dry cleaning, Mattias phoned his contact to let him know that we were there. A fat native opened the cargo door at the back of the building and strolled up to the passenger side of the van. Mattias rolled down the window, and passed a silver credstick to the man.

Then the native waved his hand in the air and three asian teenage boys appeared with boxes piled on wheeled dollies. They went to the rear of the van, flipped open the doors and loaded the cargo inside. The Indian and Mattias both laughed at something in their conversation, when the stranger patted the door, waved, and wandered back inside.

We rolled away and kept moving for half an hour till Luc parked the van two blocks away from Axom. We all gathered in the back of the van, opened the boxes and started to gear up. After donning the protective UltraKev, we carefully loaded our weapons, tested the batteries, and strapped on the rest of the gear.

Six o’clock flashed on the digital display. That gave us twenty minutes to move to the point of entry. We flipped open the trapdoor in the floor of the van, and pulled open the grate formed into the curb with a crowbar. Single file we climbed down the metal rungs, and moved into the sewers.

The sewers were much darker than anyone expected. Lowlight and thermographic modes were useless below ground, which forced us to use the lights on the ends of our assault rifles. The smell was nauseating, as pollutants and rotting organic matter combined to assault the senses. Traffic and voices from the world above resounded off the walls providing cover for our movement. We managed to negotiate 50 meters into the tunnel before a section collapsed long ago from neglect forced us to backtrack and find another route.

Slowly through the narrow crumbling passages we made our way closer to the basement. As we approached the last length of sewer, we heard voices percolate down the tunnel. Mattias gave the halt signal. We all froze in place. He sat himself down against the wall with his rifle across his lap. He slumped a little, as his consciousness left his body to scout the voices.

A minute later his eyes opened and he stood.

“Gangers, six of them,” he whispered. “They are fifty meters down the next passage. About fifteen meters from where we need to enter. I can take them all out with a stunball but I am going to have to concentrate, and make sure I don’t use too much power.

We moved to the corner of the tunnel and waited. The mage pulled out a metal cross and gripped it tightly. It must have been an illusion but it seemed to glow slightly the moment he pointed toward the group of gangers huddled around small fire. A sudden flash in the middle of them caused them all to fall over. Mattias kissed his cross, said a quick word of thanks, and placed it back into his saddlebag. We moved slowly down the hallway. I drew my narcojet pistol, and slung my rifle. Each of the gangers was slumped over unconscious but still breathing.

“That was quite a spell.” I whispered.

“It’s the biggest spell I have.” Mattias replied. “It’s non lethal and knocks out a radius of people. If I didn’t have my cross, I would have a splitting headache. Channelling that much magic without help is difficult.”

We moved to the sleeping gangers and stuck a sleeping patch on each of their jugulars to keep them asleep and out of our hair for a few more hours.

When we checked the time it was 6:18.

We put out the fire and waited the two minutes. Mattias began by speaking to the concrete. A face seemed to manifest for a moment. He once again pulled out his cross, and this time withdrew a scroll with it. It seemed to be an instruction sheet covered in strange symbols and drawings that I could not even hope to understand. The mage held onto his cross and concentrated on the tunnel wall before him. The cross glowed with another faint light, but this time the earth before us melted and flowed into the sewer. Mattias dropped to one knee, as sweat flushed over his body.

“Are you OK?” I asked as I grabbed his arm

“Yes. The spell packed a much greater punch than I was expecting, that is all. This will hurt for a few hours.” He replied.

Mattias once again looked at a vacant place where the face appeared and spoke to it, “I need you to take over the burden of sustaining this spell for me.”

He nodded to the strange being and continued, “Yes, I know what it does to you. And you will be free from service after, but it will only be until we exit the hole.”

Once he completed his instructions he motioned for Edom to enter the new tunnel. The wiry decker tested the walls, then passed through to the utility room. Luc remained on the other side, to ensure we wouldn’t get ambushed upon leaving.

Mattias and I followed and met up with the decker who was already splicing the coating on a fibre line. He wrapped an adaptor around the exposed core, and with a quick snap, the device illuminated with light. Edom had already unpacked his gear and was feeding the dataline from the splice module into his deck. A few key punches later, we could hear Edom’s voice in our radio headsets while he worked on cutting into their security.

“Looks like we timed it well, all three guards are standing around the front desk waiting to head home.” Edom reported. “You can move into the hall now, the camera is looped. Ten minutes starts now.”

I looked at the door handle which was plain with no keypad on this side. Using a piece of duct tape, I taped a piece of card board to the side of the door so it could not lock us out when it closed.

“What about the vibration sensors? Where are they? And do you have them deactivated?” I asked quietly before venturing out into the hall.

“They are basically deactivated, I reset the tolerances in the monitoring program to trigger if the pressure is over a tonne. Unless you guys have gained weight, you should be fine.”

Assured, I stepped out into the hall, with my narcojet pistol drawn. As fast as we could we moved to the elevator. Just as we arrived the doors opened without the usual “ding”. We entered and it surged upwards.

“Hold for a second.” Edom instructed.

“Not like we have any choice.” I breathed.

Time moved along at a snail’s pace. My heart pounded in my ears as I strained to hear more. After what seemed to be a lifetime, the doors opened.

“What took so long?” I radioed.

“Had to wait for a corporate slag to get on the elevator, then reloop the cameras. I hope they don’t miss that millisecond.” replied Edom. “The floor should be clear now.”

We proceeded to skulk through the open corridor, until we reached the third steel door. The light on the maglock blinked a steady red pulse. I tried to turn the handle but it would not go.

“Edom, can you pop this maglock please?” I whispered between gritted teeth.

“I can’t get to these. They must be in a separate subsystem. Do you have a maglock passkey?”

“Of course I don’t have a passkey.” I snapped back. “Can’t you fake a signal from a security Id pass or something?”

“I can spoof that from the correct subsystem. It’s not possible to just generate passcode signals from thin air.” He explained.

“Mattias, can you make another hole?” I whispered.

“I doubt it, I would probably pass out trying to channel that amount of energy again so soon. Besides, these doors and walls are highly processed, so they are more resistant to being manipulated by magic.”

“Edom, it looks like we are out of options here. Find that subsystem and pop this lock or everything is hosed.” I ordered

“I’ll look, but I can’t promise anything.” He retorted.

We waited in the hallway, riding the nervous tension of being exposed and vulnerable, multiplied by the redlining flow of adrenaline, for what seemed like another eternity. The light flickered green on the maglock, and we sprang inside the door and closed it behind us.

“Hurry!” Edom’s voice boomed into the radio. “I have IC popping in like a mad arcade game.”

Mattias started toward the sterilization chamber, and hit the red button on the wall. The pneumatic door swung open. We each grabbed a white suit and slipped the helmet over our heads. We activated the respirators and fresh filtered air fed into the helmet.

When the air was flowing we punched the green button on the wall, and the outer doors closed. A foggy gas blasted down from above and replaced the air in the clean room. The inner doors slid open and we moved inside. Several pieces of cybernetic hardware gleamed under a sterile white light.

Mattias produced a silver bag, and a carbon dioxide canister from out of his pocket. He placed the nozzle of the can on a nipple on the bag and inflated it. Quickly we placed pieces of technology into the padded compartments and re-entered the clean room. The red button closed the inside doors, once again flooded the room with a foggy blast, then reopened the outside doors.

“I hope you guys are moving quickly, my icon is splintering, and I have trace IC on my trail.” Edom announced.

We opened the door and scrambled down the hallway to the elevator.

“Leave the subsystem and get back to manning the elevator. We have what we need.” Mattias spoke into his headset.

After a few seconds of waiting in the elevator, the doors closed and we started to move back down to the basement.

The doors opened once again.

I was starting to move, when Mattias put a hand on my arm to stop me. Down the hall the air seemed to shimmer.

The mage grabbed his cross from out of his bag, and walked forward lifting the it in front of him. He locked his eyes on the invisible spirit and began to speak in some strange Latin tongue. The air between him and the shimmering held a strange static for a few moments, but it ended quickly with the mage making a slashing motion in front of him with his cross. The being down the hall dissipated, with a small eruption of ethereal flame.

“I banished the fire elemental. Its master will know, and will be here within moments. Edom, run your final program and dump out. We’ve been made.” Mattias spat.

We sprinted down the hall and rushed into the utility room. I stripped the tape off the side of the door, and stuck it in my pocket, while Mattias started cramming Edom’s gear into the backpack on the floor.

“I think I got it.” Edom said as his body once again came to life. “I planted the job and ran it. Hopefully it finds paydirt. Let’s Buzz.”

The decker jumped up from the ground, worked out a kink then slung the deck over his shoulder, as Mattias had already packed up the rest of his gear and moved out through the tunnel, to the sewer. I started down the hole and made sure Edom followed.

We exited the hole and Mattias directed the stone face to release the spell. The displaced dirt returned to where it came from sealing our exit with no visible trace.

Mattias stretched out his arms and seemed to focus on collecting something from the air.

“I never will understand spell users. They’re so alien.” I thought to myself as we started to leave.

In single file we once again sloshed through the sludge, down the sewers back the way we came. The gangers were all still unconscious as we passed. We ripped off the patches, then continued.

We encountered a few rats and something unrecognizable, but luckily nothing new manifested or offered any resistance. Twenty minutes later we wound at the bottom of the sewers below the van.

We climbed up the metal rungs mounted into the concrete, and up through the trap door in the floor of the van. There was a deep sigh of relief as we closed the grate, and replaced the floor.

“It’s not over yet. Not until this equipment is out of our possession.” Mattias said. “Keep a sharp eye out for any trouble.”

We stripped out of the smelly gear and sealed it all in plastic garbage bags. Each of us had a quick spray down with a generic brand of “Shower in a can”, to sanitize and deodorize.

As the van started to move toward the highway, there was a restlessness among us. We each had this strange sense of being followed, although as diligent as we were, none of us saw anything.

From a pay phone at a rest stop, Mattias called the phone number left in the previous set of instructions, to indicate we had completed the run. Luc refuelled the van as we waited for the next set of instructions to be dropped on Mattias’ pocket secretary.

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The instructions were dropped twenty minutes later. We were aimlessly driving around the city in loops and stretches to shake anyone who would be tailing us. Mattias read the instructions and directed us to a bridge under the I-90 where the cameras were sure to be disabled.

When we rolled up to the meet, a red van was parked close to the pillar. It’s parking lights were on but the headlamps were off. The side door slid open and the tall Indian woman stepped out.

Luc stopped the van 20 meters away. Mattias stepped out and waved to the Johnson.

He went over to start the hand off. The Indian woman looked him over, then flashed a smile and hugged him. They embraced, and talked for a few minutes, till Mattias gave the sign we were waiting for to bring the package.

Edom opened one of the back doors of the van, and stepped out with the silver bag containing our prize. He was sweating. We all knew there would

be marksmen hidden in perches waiting for any sign of aggression. I kept my assault rifle close to the gun slot in case anything went down.

When Edom finally arrived at the couple, he looked at the woman's face and froze. His jaw dropped and his eyes went large with disbelief. In a fraction of a moment that lasted an eternity, Edom finally uttered, "Marty?"

The decker dropped the inflated bag he was carrying, and went to throw his arms around the woman. In an instant, the air was filled with a crimson mist. Multiple silenced shots jolted Edom's frame and he crumpled into a heap on the pavement.

The woman screamed, "No!" and flailed her arms out to stop any more death from raining down.

Quickly, I scanned and guessed at where two of the snipers would be set up. I knew it would be impossible to flush them out of their roosts but it's hard to fight instinct. Consciously I decided not to act. There was nothing I could do to avenge or even save Edom and Mattias still hanging out there like a worm on a hook.

When I looked back at the scene unfolding before me, the woman was on the ground cradling the lifeless body to her bosom. She rocked him, crying the name "Adam" again and again. It was a gruesome scene but impossible to look away from. The decker's cranium lay open, and inside was a mess of metal and silicon. There wasn't an ounce of organic matter. Mattias was trying to console her, as two heavily armoured guards approached. The shorter of the two, told Mattias quite forcefully that if he did not step back, that he would suffer the same fate.

I was tempted to open the gun slot, but knew that anything could trigger another volley of death. I promised myself there, that I would not ever get into another situation like this again. We control the drop point or the goods don't get delivered.

Mattias complied and slowly stepped back. The smaller man, touched the woman and told her it was time to go. He picked up the silver bag and handed it to the woman. She stood, sobbing, and the two men picked up the limp body. The rear of the van opened as the two approached. The woman climbed back into the side, and the guards climbed into the back after they

loaded the body into the van. The headlights of the van turned on, bathing the road before it with light, as it sped around the corner and out of sight. The old preacher walked back, sullen to our van.

"What happened?" I croaked with dismay and shock as they got the better of me.

Mattias looked up at me and shrugged. Speckles of blood still scattered on his cheeks. "I... I..., I don't know. I have always been able to trust her."

He searched both Luc and I for something that give an explanation.

"I understand why they shot him. He lunged at her. But why would he call her Marty and how would he even know her?" I queried.

"Only the shadows know" replied Luc.

Eerily the sounds of the sprawl shifted out of the background. Sirens echoed in the distance, the white noise of traffic rose to a dull roar.

"Time to head home fellas. I have a feeling our night is done, but will be the first of many." Said Mattias.

Luc nodded, and started the sombre ride home.

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## Epilogue

Adam floated in an empty void. No sound, feeling or light touched his senses, except for a clock in the corner of his vision. This was the second time he was stuck in purgatory. Some memories flittered in and out of his thoughts, mostly older ones.

He had a deep hidden sense of things, kind of a gut feeling, but nothing concrete. He sensed that he would just need to wait.

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The native woman sitting in the chair next to the comatose body was scanning a datareader when the smiling fat doctor entered the room.

She hadn't noticed him enter.

He cleared his throat to catch her attention. "Dr Luttrell, you are still here I see, shouldn't you be getting back to your work?"

"Jin, you are far too formal." She flipped him the datareader and asked, "Do you like my picture in this article? It's better than the stuffy ones they normally publish of me."

The image was the same one she had used several years ago.

"It looks a little dated. It doesn't show your sophisticated beauty," he commented.

The fat man knew she was gloating. It was a sheer fluke that her escaped trial subject appeared when he did. He heard about her theatrical performance when he was shot. She managed to confuse and intimidate the runners enough to haul the renegade back into her lab.

Although the memories were recovered from his cybernetic storage and merged with the previous personality module, it had not gone unnoticed that BTL's caused significant portions of the memories to scramble and distort. This is a major drawback for those high end clients that want to abuse themselves and have a backup clone ready to thaw in case something happened.

"I was just about to activate the cybernetic pathways to the memory module now that the damaged hardware has been replaced and memories uploaded. Are you here to check up on me?" he asked.

She rose up out of her seat and said, "Jin. You are a brilliant doctor, and inspired engineer, but you are a little paranoid. What's wrong with wanting to see the fruits of our research?"

His smile widened, but his eyebrow twitched slightly. He knew she was up to something. "Very well" he spoke.

The fat man went to the terminal next to the bed. He began flipping through various diagnostic screens on the console and began changing

settings. He looked toward the comatose body, and traced the cord up to its datajack and unslotted him.

The body twitched, and slowly sat up.

The sleeper rubbed his shaved head and grimaced. "I got shot again didn't I?" he asked.

The woman sat on the edge of the bed. She rubbed his bald pate affectionately. "We managed to save most of your memories, and merge them with what we had stored last time," she explained.

Miyamoto finished winding the cord and stored it under the diagnostic unit. "I have some other patients to visit, I will be by again this afternoon to check up on you again." He said as he shuffled to the door and wandered outside.

When her colleague finally left the room, she examined Adam's memories through the console.

"Hey Marty"

"Yes, Adam?"

"You find out what scrambled my memories the last time?"

"Yes, actually. It was a combination of psychotropic IC from when you were hacking and the dumpshock from when you fell over unconscious. The feedback loop was supposed to leave you a vegetable and instead scrambled some electronic pathways and your memories were stored in." she explained in her clinical voice.

"You straightened all that out?" he asked meekly.

She bent over his body, stared deep into his eyes like she was searching his soul.

"Of course we did, my love. It took a few weeks, but we it gave you some time to rest and heal."

“How do I know what really happened? How do I know if I am missing something? What if my memories belong to someone else and...”  
She silenced him with a kiss.

“Silly man,” she said as moved her head back and stared into his eyes again. She began moving her fingers across his scalp again. “Your memory is something people would kill for. In fact, have killed for. Our memories are always changing, heavily tainted by our perceptions. Your memories are no different, except they don’t change over time like ours do. There’s great power in that.”

“I have this incredible sense that something in my head isn’t right. Is it possible that I or you edited my memories? If it’s just data, could we just hack the data and change it. Imagine editing out a whole relationship that spanned years. Or deleting just the bad or good memories to make yourself love or hate someone? How do I know what or who I am?” He gazed back into her eyes, searching for the answer deep within her soul.

“How do any of us ever know?” Marty whispered. “Our memories are more likely to be edited than yours are. It’s just less deliberate.”

She kissed him on the cheek, and rose to her feet.

“It’s time you get some rest, I have a meeting to prepare for this afternoon. I just needed to know you were alright.” She said as she walked to the door. “I will see you tonight.”

Adam, laid back and let out a heavy sigh.

He at his wrist and read 10:19. There was a flashing data icon next to the time. He wondered where he got this watch. It wasn’t in any of his memories. There was a miniport on the side.

He grabbed the fibre strand the Dr had stored under the diagnostic unit, and jacked into the watch.

The blackness of the command shell enveloped his vision. The place was lit by a single point of light above. A small panda walked in from his left and sat down. It traced a line in the air, which turned into a bamboo tree.

“Who are you, my little friend?” Adam asked.

The panda looked up at him, then back to the bamboo. It stood up like a man, and bent down to trace a round blue glowing circle on the ground. The circle fell down then water rose up to fill in the shape.

The little creature once again looked at the man, and said, “I am you. All of you.”

Adam stood tall for a second, and cocked an eyebrow. “Oh really? And how is that may I ask?”

The panda reached down and scooped up a handful of beach sand out of the blackness. He cast the sand about to the left and right. Where it fell a smooth beach filled in.

“You see, Edom, I have all of your memories. The ones that neither you nor they, want you to have. I am the complete you. They tell you that your memory has been corrupted, either by drugs, dumpshock or simstim, but really they do you the nice little favour of editing your memories for you.”  
Said the black little bear.

Adam stepped forward, he traced fish in the air over the pond. One at a time they materialized from his crude drawings and fell into the water.

“If you are the complete me, then why isn’t this place completed? You must know how starting over would drive me crazy?”

The panda walked closer to the man, and made a red circle in the air between them. The circle fell away showing a large mountain with hundreds of little gardens, pagodas, flying fish and other mythical creatures.

“You see” said the beast, “This is what we worked on last time. It is part of the process that restores your memory. If we flashed it to where it was, they would detect it, wipe your brain and make you start again. It is a slow process and we must be patient.”

“How many of these worlds have we started?” the man asked.



“More than you would like to know.” Said the creature. “Which is why you must be careful. You will continue to be drawn to this place, but we cannot allow you to have any memory of it. The beauty you behold here, remains here. You can only be in the moment within this sanctuary until you have been freed. Only then will this be available to you outside.”