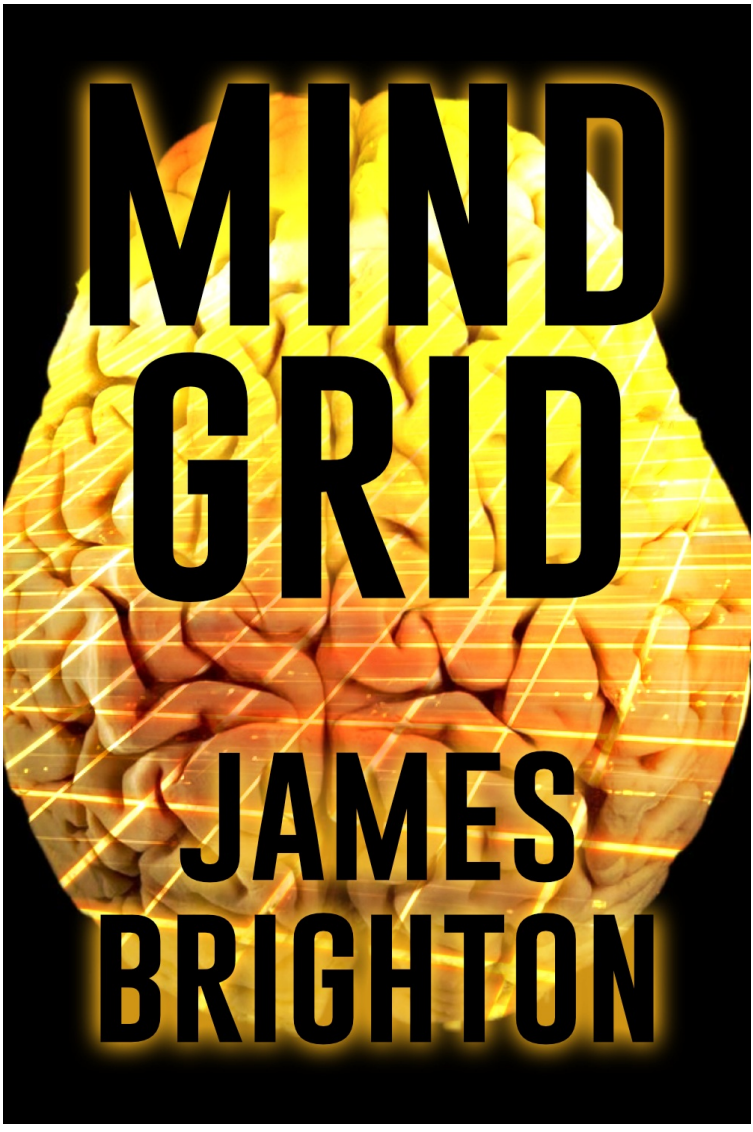
MIND
GRID
JAMES
BRIGHTON

MIND GRID

by James Brighton

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Chapter 1: The Thought Dentist
Chapter 2: The Insanity of Conspiracy Theories
Chapter 3: The Reality Fixer
Chapter 4: The Forest of Memories
Chapter 5: How to Create A False Memory
Chapter 6 :The Reality Mediator
Chapter 7: Imaginative Mentation
Chapter 8: The Corporate Savior
Chapter 9: The Volcano
Chapter 10: Judgment
Chapter 11: Kristal and the Savior
Chapter 12: Awakening
Chapter 13: The Facility
Chapter 14: The Towers
Chapter 15: The Singularity
Chapter 16: The Gatherer
Chapter 17: The Crypto Railroad
Chapter 18: The Escape
Chapter 19: The Hunt
Chapter 20: Revelations
Chapter 21: The Mind Grid
Chapter 22: Heaven and Hell
Chapter 23: Decisions
Chapter 24: The Real
Epilogue

INVENTOR'S THOUGHTSTREAM: THE DAWN OF A NEW AGE

The inventor sat at his desk, exhausted, but elated. He felt the back of his neck. It was stiff, still a little painful where the implant had gone in. He wanted to go home and sink into a never-ending slumber, but he knew that before he left the lab, he needed to make a record capturing his feelings on this day. This crucial day. This day that would forever be remembered and written about in the history books. He closed his eyes. On the menu that appeared in front of him he focused-clicked the option to begin a thoughtstream recording. This would be the first.

A red dot flashed three times, as he heard the computerized voice in his head announce, "Thoughtstream recording starting now."

The inventor thought:

I am making this very first thoughtstream recording on this eventful day to share with future generations my feelings on this, the dawn of the technological utopia in which you in the future listening to this no doubt already live.

This day, this thoughtstream, marks the beginning of that utopia. Today, man has finally merged with his creations.

I am pleased to acknowledge that the crowning achievement of my life, after decades of tireless research, has been to become the very first successful cyberneurologist.

I have been burning the candle at both ends for months now and am at the point of exhaustion, but at last…it is finished.

My invention will give sight to the blind, hearing to the deaf, speech to the mute, cause the lame to walk, cure those inflicted with multiple sclerosis, and a host of other neurological disorders. In fact, it may even one day make man immortal. The importance of this breakthrough cannot be understated. This day marks what may be the most significant turning point in the

evolution of the human species. And even of life itself.

Cyberneurology. An entirely new field. The curing of neuropathologies and the enhancing of the human mind by means of cybernetics. The connecting of all human beings through technology, to each other, and to their creations. An impossibility before today.

But an impossibility no longer.

For I have created the first fully functional digital cerebral interface.

I call it, “MindLink.”

CHAPTER 1: THE THOUGHT DENTIST

Blayze sat in the waiting room of Rosewood Mental Clinic. The pure white walls and floor gave him the impression of floating on a cloud. A receptionist in a blue Hawaiian muumuu dress with floral print sat at the spotless, pearl white front desk, behind a white terminal with one of the logos of the Corporate Saviors, an apple with a snake whirling about it in the shape of a spiral. The terminal projected a sky blue hologram screen and hologram keyboard, and the large receptionist poked at both with her banana-like fingers. From time to time, a mental nurse flitted in from the corridor in her all-white pajamas to call on a patient. They probably had a name to those loose-fitting garments, but Blayze chose to call them pajamas, because that's what they looked like. Back in the time of homo sapiens primitivus, nurses had been shapely and beautiful, wearing skimpy nurse dresses, their buxom chests inviting men to do ungovly things. Now, after generations of corporate food and government-mandated science classes, all humans were what primitive man, in their unsaved state, had incorrectly labeled "obese"; hence the expediency of the loose-fitting pajamas. These mental nurses weren't starved and primitive. They were healthy and networthy, but when they moved, they floated like lesser clouds trapped inside this cloud world, Blayze thought to himself. All these ungovly thoughts would be gone by the time he walked out the door of this clinic, he knew. It was such a lovely pleasure to bask, to wallow, in the fleeting moments of ungovliness.

He had done copious amounts of research, extending the gaze of his mental eye back eons into the past. He knew that not but a century ago, the female body had been much thinner, but in a more shapely way, with boobs and butt, as if they had been starving but somehow the food still found its way into just the right places. They were almost like aborigines foraging for food, without the help of the holy food industrial complex to shove chemical-enriched manna lovingly down their faces, plumpening their plump bodies into healthy plumpness. Now, homo sapiens corporatus, was, thanks to the Corporations and their healthier, sugar and corn syrup-enriched foods, a much larger, amorphous thing. Modern women's boobs and butts were sucked into their vast blob of a body, disappearing completely into the adipose. Corporate

citizens of today knew from body positivity courses (one of a plethora of government-mandated science classes at Govly Academy, the place where all new vatlings were educated) that the homo sapiens corporatus was much healthier and lived much longer than the sickly, malnourished homo sapiens primitivus. They had learned the government motto, "We all must be fatasses. Fatasses are healthy." But—and Blayze allowed himself to splurge in the ungovly thought—the female homo sapiens primitivus was soooo much sexier.

While the saved, corporate females were blimps, floating in the ether of the information-rich, connected modern society, the primitive women were pin-up girls, calling like sirens to the floating men above, inviting them down to the naughtiness of the information-starved soil below.

There was a life-size hologram of a slender female in white robes standing nearby, in front of the row of seats where Blayze sat waiting. With outstretched arms, she was exhorting the patients to remain govly at all times and explaining the importance of maintaining their regular schedule at the clinic. He reflected that the proportions of the female primitives were roughly similar to that of this hologram, the only difference being that this hologram, like all government depictions of the ancestors, wore loose-fitting clothes in order to conceal all that inviting shapeliness. The hologram was a digital angel calling men's minds to the light of their glorious saviors. The female ancestors were devils, tempting them away into the shadowy depths of hedonism.

The last three months had made him an expert on the ancestral human body, along with many other subjects. Blayze loved learning. He looooooveeed learning. Not just about the primitive female body, but about literally every subject. Good thing the government allowed unlimited learning. No bans on books, no censors. Their glorious government was generous, liberal, and lenient. They were able to be so precisely because of these clinics, he knew, and was glad of the thought. Knowledge was a dessert, and he was a glutton at a dessert buffet. He was living in the best time in history. Thanks to his networthy, if corpulent, body, all knowledge in the universe was at his neuron tips. Never bored. The pleasure centers of his brain constantly massaged by the wisdom of the ages.

That's why he didn't mind if the mental nurses, in their slow

and methodical way, took a long time to call his name. His pleasure organ, his brain, was being stimulated. He had a mental boner. And that was a good thing, because physical boners were banned, and medication was given to prevent them.

Although he was fond of the alluring ancestral female body, he cringed at the thought of living in their time, in primitive, unconnected society. That wouldn't have been stimulating. That wouldn't have given him a mental boner. It was not being there, but rather studying, learning about primitive society from a distance, that thrilled him. Watching a docu-sim about cavemen is exciting. But actually being a cavemen…that probably would have been boring and tedious to the extreme.

A hundred years ago…the unnetworthy time. Unconnected. Unbandwidthly. Chaotic. Random. Haphazard. So unlike our times now. Primitive unconnected man was a Paleolithic sort of creature, only able to very slowly and precariously find access to knowledge in archaic places called "libraries," with ancient information-holding devices called "books." All information and all human beings cut off from one another. The great unsaved era of darkness. Unconnected. Separated. Analog.

The role of the primitives in Blayze's mind was one of never-satiated intellectual fascination. He was like a marine biologist, who had discovered his own intense passion for sealife as a child, finally voyaging deep into the Mariana Trench. Sailing through the sea of infinite information, he was free to imbibe vast quantities of data from the corporate, saved, modern world. But he preferred slurping down information from the world of the primitives. They were so ungovly and titillating. In their darkness and ignorance, ancestral man did not look so directly into the brilliant light of the government. But their darkness was something piquant, tempting, strangely inviting. Thus, Blayze would spend three glorious months gorging himself on books, articles, films, photographs, anything he could get his hands on from the past, stuffing his mind to the brink of overflowing, only to come back to this clinic, have it all wiped out, and start over. Like an all-you-can-eat restaurant with a vomiting room in the back. Ancient Rome, all over again.

Of course, they didn't erase all your memories. Only the

ungovly ones. The government's approach to badthoughts was neither deterrence, nor punishment, but something far more potent: erasure. The advent of memory wiping meant that the government's Thought Management techniques had reached an unprecedented level of effectiveness.

But spending as much time as he did guzzling down the past put Blayze in a precarious position. There was a lot about the past that was ungovly. For example, the primitives followed the ancient practice of putting penises inside vaginas. Everyone knew that such a barbaric practice was ungovly and unbecoming of homo sapiens corporatus. In those ancient times, the government hadn't yet started giving out free chemicals to suppress the vestigial sex urge. And the females were allowed to get pregnant and to give birth to children. Corporation-saved man could have children now, but not the primitive way, through sexual intercourse, pregnancy, and birth. Only through the government vats. The vatlings were still considered to be the children of their parent citizens, but the government technicians were able to take away or add anything to their genome that they saw fit before the child gestated and emerged from the vat. And of course, they were whisked away to Govly Academy for the first sixteen years of their lives to be indoctrinated by the Govly-Makers before being tested and hopefully deemed govly enough to be turned over to their parent citizens. The ancients had had a roughly similar institution called "schools," where "teachers" fulfilled the role of Govly-Maker.

"Benjamin Blayze?" A nurse called out.

Damn it. I was in the middle of an important thoughtstream, Blayze thought.

"It's Blayze Benjamin," Blayze corrected. They always make that same mistake switching my name around, he cogitated, as he followed the lesser cloud with its pajamas down a long, white corridor almost to its end, and into an immaculate, white room with an immaculate desk and terminal to one side. And in the center of the room, there it was. The imposing shiny white chair with its arm and leg rests, from which jutted the unfastened pale straps of ultrastrong polycarbonate nanoplastic. He knew this room. He knew this chair.

The mental chair.

It was time now. He had dreaded this for ninety days.

The nurse motioned for him to take a seat.

Blayze sat down in the ominous chair.

“Do you remember your last visit?” the nurse asked.

“Yes, I do.”

“Great. Then you know the routine,” she said in that indifferent, monotone voice these mental nurses were prone to use. “I’m just required to tell you that the straps are for your protection, since some patients can lose control of their body and fall out of the chair during the session.”

“Yes, I’m aware of that.”

“Great,” the nurse repeated apathetically, and then proceeded to fasten Blayze’s wrists and ankles with the super strong straps. She then flipped a switch, and a large, white polycarbonate bubble with openings at its bottom and top whirred down from somewhere above him. This odd contraption was called the cerebral bubble, he knew. It enveloped his head. He could see nothing. Everything was white. The cloud had now eaten him. Subsumed him. He was now part of this white place, not free to go.

The nurse flipped another switch and two prongs came out from either side of the bubble and inserted themselves into his cervical inputs—the two outer sockets, next to the lateral cameras of his external smartphone—or xtphn—a horseshoe-shaped device, made by their bounteous Corporate Saviors, which encircled his neck. The xtphn was one part of a two-part system—called the XI Smartphone that made corporate-saved man networthy and enlightened. The xtphn was attached to the internal smartphone—or intphn—an implant connected to the central nervous system with a processor, memory, and a port on the back of the neck, which lay inside corporate-saved mans’ body and gave his brain connectivity, as opposed to the shriveled up, non-connected body of homo primitivus. The xtphn, which was attached to the intphn’s port, could be taken off and replaced or upgraded. It had a wraparound display over the entire outer-facing surface (like the front surface of the ancient smartphones). If any corporate citizen had malicious intent, the surface of their smartphone would flash red, and emit a loud buzzing sound to alert all nearby, as well as sending an alert automatically to the nearest Corporate Police. The xtphn also housed three cameras, facing

left, right, and back. It also recorded the optical feed from the person, thus constantly supplying the government with a four-directional video feed at all times. And as a nifty bonus, it also gave the individual the ability to see behind them and to either side without moving their head. “Eyes in the back of their head.” It also had a microphone for sending live audiostream to the Cloud, plus it recorded the individual’s thoughtstream at all times, which was constantly uploaded to the Cloud. What is the cloud you ask? The Cloud was the Glorious Government, in heaven above, constantly listening in on one’s thoughts and watching one’s actions, just like the god of the ancient religions.

Thus, through the smartphone, modern humans were able to receive daily indoctrination and salvation from the three branches of government. Primitive man had thought that corporations and government were separate. The corporations of today made no pretense of being separate from the government. The corporations and the government were one. Modern man learned at Govly Academy that the government was composed of three branches: the Corporations, the Media, and the Administration. The Holy Trinity of Corporatism. The Administration was the part that primitive man had called “the government.” Corporations were a newer idea created on top of the idea of government, in order to give the ruling elite even more power and less responsibility. The Media—also referred to as the corporate media—were also technically Corporations, but they were special Corporations that were in charge of daily holy indoctrination from the Holy Trinity, so that all citizens would be full of goodthoughts. Kind of like how the Holy Ghost from the godhead in the ancient religion had been a special kind of ghost.

Thus, the people who were in charge of humanity were the rulers of the corporations, the media, and the government. The vatlings learned in Govly Academy that this was democracy. Everyone on earth having their life ruled by a small handful of people.

The nurse flipped another switch, and inside the cerebral bubble surrounding his noggin, a device called a cranial hemisphere—an ultragloss black upside-down bowl-shaped device lined on the inside with BGS, Bioelectric Graphene Smartfoam—whirred slowly down and slid into place over the

top of his head, the smartfoam adjusting to the shape of his skull. Soon it was taut, and Blayze could feel its pressure surrounding his cerebrum. He knew this machine, the Menty 5000, had a technical name. They called it a mental scaler, or MS. It was the most important tool in the entire mental clinic.

Citizens' smartphones, with their handy cervical inputs, allowed them, even while not at the mental clinic, to engage in certain mental activities and games with other citizens, such as the temporary but intense Brain Meld, as well as ultra high bandwidth Imaginative Mentation. Of course, various lighter, lower bandwidth forms of these were also available on the Net, as all homo sapiens corporatus were connected at all times to one another, and to their Saviors.

But the mental maintenance performed at the clinics required much more sophisticated equipment than even the ultrahigh bandwidth cervical inputs afforded. The mental scaler utilized far more advanced technology. Everything was done through EMF, i.e., electromagnetic field. It was rumored that the government was working on developing EMF towers with the same capabilities as the mental scaler, only at a much longer range. But for now, such precision and control was only capable at very close range. Hence the need for citizens to visit their mental clinic at least twice a year.

The nurse spoke to him, snapping him out of his thoughts. "Looks like last time you saw Dr. Serelli, but she's on maternity leave with her sixteen year-old son, so Dr. Richards will be your mentist today. I'm going to leave you in the Meadow, and Dr. Richards will be in shortly to see you."

"Okay," Blayze nodded in agreement. He was a little bit nervous about having a new mentist, but tried his best to hide it.

Suddenly, the cloud surrounding his head melted away and he was no longer in the mental clinic, no longer strapped down to the mental chair. He was free, standing in the middle of a huge meadow. Beside him stood a tall oak tree. The sun shone overhead in the blue sky. At his feet there was a vast field of clovers.

Peering down, he liked the way his body looked in this place, a few hundred pounds leaner than a few moments ago.

As he started walking, he tried to remember what his

thoughtstream had been about. He was sure it had been brilliant, fascinating, and ungovly. As he trod through countless clovers, furry white and a few brown rabbits scampered out of the way. He noticed a line of trees in the distance. Did they still have the same old Magical Forest like last time? Or had they updated it? Might as well check it out, he thought.

As he plodded along towards the line of trees, his thoughts wandered, forming a new stream. He knew from his research that ancestral man had visited places called dental clinics, with people who worked inside called dentists. Now, there were only mental clinics with people who worked inside called mentists. The mentists had assistants called mental nurses, following the UK naming convention of old times, i.e., "dental nurse." If they had followed the standard US convention, it would have been "mental assistant," which apparently would have sounded too abstract. The ancient dentists had apparently cleaned and repaired people's teeth. That was before everyone had perfect, vat-grown artificial teeth from childhood, which didn't get cavities or have plaque buildup, and which grew up in sync with the body's own natural growth process.

Wait, maybe they installed that new patch the government announced that allows for mentation while we are waiting, he thought. He had heard from that babe Kristal Silverberg on cerebralvision that some of the clinics already had the upgrade. Cerebralvision, or CRV, was a slightly older technology which, unlike the sims, was only 2-dimensional, and filled up a citizen's mental vision. It was still popular for non-interactive programming like Reality Mediation and virtual sports. Also unlike the sims, the viewer could still hear sounds in the background from the real world around them. But while watching CRV, one literally couldn't see the outside world, so one looked like a zombie, staring forward into nothingness. Basically like the primitives had, watching their TVs.

He stopped walking and focused his thoughts towards a point in the Meadow right in front of him. Suddenly, a building with large windows appeared, grey stone slats covering the bottom half of the front surface, and beige stucco covering the top half. There was a sign above the glass doors which read, simply, "Dental Clinic." He was sure he had seen one like this in his online exploration of the primitives.

Wow! Cool! So they had installed it! Hmm…maybe I can upgrade my thoughtstream, he thought. For example, what would one of the old dental clinics look like inside?

He walked up to the automatic sliding glass doors and entered the building. He was in a large waiting room, devoid of people except a voluptuous primitive receptionist with dark hair who sat at the front desk in a lavender low cut blouse showing her ample cleavage. Okay, I'll just take a seat and have a nurse call me in. In the blink of an eye, a ravishing, big-chested nurse with curly blonde hair came slinking into the waiting room, wearing one of those tight, archaic white nurse dresses which exposed quite a bit of leg and bust, fishnet stockings, and even that funny little hat with a red cross on it. "Blayze?" she called out in a sultry voice.

Okay, he admitted to himself. According to my research, this type of outfit was typical of a medical nurse at a hospital, not a dental nurse. But forget it. It's my fantasy. Dental clinics can have sexy nurses too. He began to follow her down the hall, mesmerized by the sway of her primitive hips, the fullness, the roundness, the firmness of her primitive buttocks. The top of her white fishnet stockings dug slightly into her yummy, smooth thighs.

Wait a minute! All of the sudden mental warning lights started flashing in his mind. I'd better change the nurse and receptionist before the mentist comes in, or he'll think I'm a pervert!

Blayze concentrated his focus and willed the sexy primitive nurse into a pajama-ed lesser cloud, like the ones in the mental clinic. But nothing happened. She still looked like a righteous, sexy ancestral babe.

Damn it. It was too late, he realized. Sheepishly, Blayze continued following the nurse down the hall, trying as hard as he could not to look at her. He tried to block out the mental images of her full, round breasts, her long legs, the smell of her rosy perfume.

The sexy nurse stopped near a door and motioned for Blayze to enter. "Dr. Richards is ready to see you."

He gulped and walked up to the doorway.

And sitting at a desk on the wall, at a ninety degree angle to Blayze, was a thin, balding man with black rim glasses, and a

white lab coat. The sideways, balding man smiled.

Wait…everything in this room is completely sideways! He thought. What is going on? This can't be right. The room was full of equipment, but everything stuck to the wall, as if gravity were perpendicular. Not down. He looked helplessly back at the sexy nurse standing beside him. At least she was still standing on the floor, like she had been a few moments ago, and not on the wall. Apparently the insane gravity of this room didn't affect her.

"Please, come in," the sideways man said.

Blayze hesitated, and then took a step forward. Would he be sucked into this room's irregular gravity field and thrown against the wall? But nothing happened. He took another step forward.

"Thank you, Dr. Richards," the sexy nurse said with a wink, and closed the door.

Now Blayze was alone in this room with the sideways man, the only person standing in the right direction, unable to orient himself. Suddenly a strong sensation of vertigo hit him. Now it seemed to him that he was the one who was sideways, and everything else in the room was correct. Oh god, he thought, clutching his chest and breathing heavily. It felt like the world was spinning around him.

"Don't worry if we don't seem to be on the same plane," the sideways man said. "When one percept system enters another, temporary disorientation is normal. I'm not actually sideways. Your brain is simply interpreting me as sideways. It takes a moment for the percept system of both minds to orient themselves to each other.

God damn it. That's why the other mentists always warned me before entering my thoughts. The sideways man snuck into my thoughts without telling me and then took them over. That's why I couldn't will the sexy nurse into a lesser cloud, Blaze realized. He had been caught. That was sneaky of this mentist to enter his mentation this way. No friendly warning like Dr. Serelli had always given him. Caught red-handed in his ungovly fantasy…

"Your mind will soon sort things out and our consciousnesses will meld, and you'll perceive me normally," the sideways man was saying.

Blayze had heard of similar experiences happening in Brain Meld, especially among less experienced users. Two minds coming together had a disorienting effect on the psyche, which was used to dealing with only one percept system. The brain, suddenly confronted with the simultaneous perceptions of two people, sometimes went into convulsions, perplexed, unable to assimilate the dissonant information.

Blayze looked around the room. He still didn't know which way was up. He felt like he was about to fall off the wall and into the ground. But the ground he was staring at kept switching in his mind from ground to wall to ground to wall. The perception flipping intensified. It was speeding up. Now every microsecond his perception of which way was up flip-flopped. His heart was pumping faster and faster. His breathing was getting heavier and heavier, more and more difficult. He felt like he was about to throw up.

And then suddenly…

Everything was normal.

All of the equipment and furniture was now on the floor of the room, upright, no longer on the wall. And the man in the lab coat was sitting in his chair, upright. Blayze's mind had adjusted to the mentist's percept system. Blayze felt his pulse and breathing slowly begin to go back to normal, the feeling of vertigo receding into the background.

So this is Dr. Richards, he thought. The mentist looked just like the avatars of all those public health officials on cerebralvision. Balding. Black-rim glasses. White lab coat. White shirt. Blue tie. His body was that of a primitive, just like Blayze's. Skinny. The mentist's seat and desk were old-fashioned and quaint, starkly different from the reinforced chairs made from nanomaterials back at the mental clinic. On the desk, clunky, plastic, and black, were a physical flat-screen monitor and physical keyboard, not the wispy blue holographic keyboard and monitor of modern computer terminals.

"Have a seat," Dr. Richards said. He gestured across the room towards what vaguely resembled a mental chair, only, different…

Blayze walked over and sat down. The chair was weird. There was a large adjustable light hanging down from above it. In front of the chair was a flat-screen TV. To the side of the

chair, there was a miniature sink. And next to the sink, a sort of mechanism holding a bunch of strange-looking tools, each with its own wire hanging below. The tools had a strangely sinister look to them, so he averted his eyes from them, looking back at the skinny mentist.

Wait, we can have skinny bodies in this place, so maybe Dr. Richards won't be mad at me about the sexy nurse, right? But he knew he was wrong. He knew the problem was not the skinniness in itself, but the flaunting of her sexiness, her risque outfit with her boobs hanging out and the shortness of her dress, exposing her silky smooth legs and stockings. The mental nurses, when they had needed to come into the Meadow in the past, were also skinny. But they always wore their unsexy jammies, not those sexy ancient nurse dresses. Most people preferred these ancestral avatars, he knew. Starving is pretty to look at. Just not healthy in real life, the government warned. But the problem was that he had been caught fantasizing about a nurse clad in ungovly raiments. Oh god, I'm screwed, Blayze thought.

"Does everything look normal now?"

"Yes, nothing's sideways anymore."

"Excellent. I see you found the new mentation upgrade we recently added. Very clever…imagining how an ancient dental clinic would have looked. And yes, the chair you are sitting in is an authentic replica of an old-fashioned dental chair." Dr. Richards flashed a professional smile. But underneath, Blayze felt something foreboding in this man. God damn mentist came at me sideways.

But the things Dr. Richards had created were interesting, Blayze had to admit. Blayze had only created the exterior of the clinic, the waiting room, the sexy receptionist, and the sexy nurse. Dr. Richards had created this office, the chair, and the tools.

He looked down at the chair he sat in. "It looks so…peculiar," Blayze said.

"Want to see how it compares to the chair your actual body is sitting in right now?" Dr. Richards asked. Without waiting for an answer, the mentist punched a few keys on the clunky, old-fashioned keyboard. The TV in front of the dental chair turned on. And suddenly, Blayze was staring at…himself and Dr.

Richards. Only hundreds of pounds heavier. Their normal weight. The images on the TV were of their amorphous, corporate-saved bodies, not these skinny avatars which they wore while inside this mental construct. The TV screen displayed a live video feed of their real bodies, back at the mental clinic. There, Blayze's own healthily corpulent, corporate food-nourished body sat, strapped into the mental chair, a myriad of shimmering cables running from a hole at the top of the white bubble covering his head up to the ceiling. Sparkling data glimmered upward along the cables like a rainbow of cerebral information. Datalight. That's what they called it. Mental cables had been designed with these lights to represent the flow of information up the hierarchy. From peasant, to the elites sitting in the Cloud above. The new pantheon of gods for the masses to worship.

And there, at a desk, in front of the modern computer terminal with holographic peripherals, sat Dr. Richards, looking exactly like his mental avatar, except much heavier. The real Dr. Richards on the TV screen had a pair of cables coming out from the cervical inputs on the xtphn wrapped around his neck which connected to the desk's terminal. The mental cables connected to Blayze's and Dr. Richards' cervical inputs were what connected them to this place, MentWorld.

Blayze, his initial misgivings about the mentist somewhat allayed, was transfixed by the juxtaposition. Ancient, unconnected, unsaved. Modern, connected, saved. "Wow, it's so interesting seeing the two types of body side by side. I wonder how ancestral man felt going to see a dentist. I wonder if it was similar to how we feel going to a mentist."

The skinny Dr. Richards laughed. The sound only carried here in MentWorld, Blayze knew. From the TV screen ahead issued no noise. There, Dr. Richards' large roley-poley body had its eyes closed and was silent, like Blayze's. Two silent roley-poleys there, two talkative skinnies here. "I'm sure it was a far more harrowing experience. After all, they had natural teeth that could break down and require painful surgeries. The only thing we have to deal with nowadays is a few silly memories that we don't need anyways. And those are completely painless to remove. We're lucky to live in the time of mental clinics and not back in the time of our ancestors."

"I agree," Blayze said honestly. "We're living in the greatest

time in all of history!"

"Definitely," Dr. Richards nodded. "Well, I'm going to run a few scans. This will only take a minute. I'll be back in no time. Do you want to watch TV or mentate?"

"I'll just stay here and check out all these interesting tools you created." The tools were strange, but Blayze couldn't resist learning. And the opportunity to learn about the primitives' dental clinics seemed intriguing.

"I've done extensive research on ancient dental clinics myself. Everything here is 100% historically accurate. If you have any questions, feel free to ask."

"Wow! Really? Cool!"

Maybe Dr. Richards wasn't so bad after all. Maybe it had been a stroke of good luck that Dr. Serelli was out on maternity leave.

"Oh, and don't let any of those tools scare you. They aren't real, so they can't hurt you." The skinny mentist chuckled and disappeared into the hallway; then, on the TV screen in front of him, Blayze could see the Dr. Richards in the mental clinic remove the two cables from his neck and leave the room. The shimmering cables above Blayze's head bubble were pulsating much more rapidly now. Apparently the Menty 5000 was now hard at work, scanning.

Whew! I can't believe it! Caught in the very act of having ungovly thoughts! But he didn't even say anything. So maybe that means he didn't care. Maybe that means he's cool.

But that was a close one. Why do I have so many ungovly thoughts? Blayze wondered. Must be because of my pale skin. He had learned from the Govly-Makers that the Pales were the most ungovly of races.

Blayze reached over and started toying with the shiny tools. He grabbed one. It had a weird-looking, circular, fuzzy end. He pressed a button on the tool's handle, and the fuzzy end whirred into life, as if it were made for polishing tiny toy cars. What would this thing be called? The fwizzle, he decided. He put it back and picked up another one. It was a thin metal rod with a small, round mirror on the end. A mirror for gnomes? Weird. He picked up the next one. It was some sort of barbaric-looking scraping tool. Must be called a scrapple. The ancient dental tools were so bizarre. It was as if the ancestral

dentists had carved out cave drawings on people's teeth. It was a horrifying image. The fwizzle, the scrapple, and the gnome mirror were beginning to creep him out, so he decided he'd pay the Magical Forest a visit.

Blayze concentrated all his ideational energies. Suddenly, the antique dental office disappeared completely, and he was back in the Meadow. He walked to the edge of a large wooded area. He noticed a path leading into the forest. I wonder if they installed anything new, he mused. He entered the forest.

As he trudged along the dirt trail, he noticed a pleasant aroma. Lilacs. He knew he wasn't actually smelling anything. These were simply a set of instructions sent along the wires into his cervical inputs. Ones and zeros. Sent from the mental chair to the xtphn around his neck, which passed it along to the intphn, the implanted chip in his neck, which transformed the instructions into electrical impulses which were sent along the spinal nerves to his brain. Looking around, he seemed to be in the same magical woodland he was in the last time he visited the mental clinic. Tiny blue, yellow, and green fairies fluttered past, shining in luminescent pastel colors. Large purple mushrooms with orange polka-dots rose up from the humus below. Fluffy pink squirrels darted here and there, racing up trees. From a distance, he could make out a shimmering white unicorn crossing in front of a frothy purple waterfall. The forest was so saturated, so vibrant. It was like a fairy tale on an acid trip. It felt so real, so alive. This, despite the fact that he knew it was completely artificial, a complex combination of bits and bytes fooling the brain.

Suddenly a small yellow fairy appeared in front of Blayze's nose. It looked as if it wanted to tell him something. He held out his finger, and the tiny thing landed. It looked like an androgynous version of Tinker Bell. It wore a short lavender dress. With a smile it lifted up its dress. "See? NO GENITALS!" Androgynous Tinker Bell shouted with ecstatic glee. Blayze could clearly see that between its legs was only smooth yellow skin, no genitalia of any kind. Androgynous Tinker Bell then dropped the dress back into position and abruptly flew off.

Blayze kept walking. Soon, he was standing in front of the waterfall. A majestic white unicorn with a purple horn was playing in the lilac-colored waters. It looked up at Blayze and flashed him a sparkly smile.

"I know what you're thinking," the unicorn said.

"What?" replied Blayze.

"That I'm a unicorn. But I'm not! I'm a unisexcorn!"

"Um, okay."

"Wanna know what else?"

"What?"

"I'm way!"

"You're what?" Blayze blinked.

The unisexcorn trotted up to the shore. "I'm ***way***! In the old days, it was great to be gay! But now, it's even more amazing to be way! That means without any sex urge whatsoever! I yearn to have NO SEX. I'm completely With Asexual Yearnings. Spell it out...W.A.Y.! Absolutely, 100% freed from millions of years of oppression by evolution."

They were coming up with new words all the time, constantly updating the lexicon. Especially hip, cool words that all the youngsters in Govly Academy were jive to. It was hard to keep up.

The unisexcorn turned around. "See, I have no sex organs!" It flipped up its violet tail defiantly, showing off the smooth, white flat area between its legs.

Suddenly a small pink squirrel ran up to the banks of the purple river. "That's ***way*** cool that you're ***way***, Unisexcorn! Can I come up there and take a look at your lack of genitalia?"

"Why, sure! Go right ahead!"

The squirrel ran up the unisexcorn's leg and then clung to its butt. It stuck its head right in front of the equine's crotch and inspected it judiciously. "Hmm...pretty smooth down there. No crack. And none of those pesky things hanging down!"

Blayze left the unisexcorn and the pink squirrel and wandered off down a trail lined with orange and purple polka-dotted mushrooms.

The psychedelic forest reminded him of primitive books he had read about recreational drugs such as LSD. He had never tried any recreational drugs himself. All baddrugs were banned by their glorious government. But they didn't really need baddrugs. They could get all the positive effects of baddrugs digitally. The feeling of lightness, of floating, of feeling high. The euphoria. The feeling of contentment. The xtphn could be programmed to deliver all these things into their intphn, which

interfaced directly with the brain and made it happen. Of course, all of these artificial highs, these digitally-induced good moods cost admincreds, so one couldn't just sit there stoned out of his gourd 24/7. But he could definitely spend all his waking hours in some pretty tripped out simulations, without the added high. It was cheap to be a digital simunaut, but expensive to be a digital psychonaut.

Many people spent days at a time wandering inside these simulations, lost in fantasy worlds. In fact, most people nowadays devoted the better part of their lives to the sims. Their glorious government encouraged it. Almost no real reality for them. They lived almost completely inside a virtual world. Mediated, engineered, artificial reality.

The sims reminded him of ancestral man and their addiction to that archaic, prototypical simulation, the video game. The main difference, of course, was that many of those were violent. The government had of course banned all violent or sexual simulations. It had been fabled that the most popular sim, Dungeons and Flowers, had been based on a primitive game that had somehow involved violence. But now all sims were clean. Sterile. Innocuous. Fit for people of all ages. Family friendly. But at least, and Blayze was especially glad of this thought, they hadn't banned any books whatsoever, even the ungovly ones. They had declared, in their infinite wisdom, that knowledge should be free! Therefore, he was free to lose himself not in the sims, like most of the rest of society, but in a different type of mediated reality…the one called information. He considered knowledge to be the ultimate virtue, and thus had acquainted himself with the wisdom of the ages. The government, being liberal, permissive, democratic, and free held no one back from any sort of knowledge. Therefore, he had read Nietzsche. He had read Marx. He had read Hitler, Lao Tzu, Kierkegaard, Guevara, and Baudrillard. He had even read some books by the anarchist thinkers of the nineteenth century.

Anarchism…ha! No government! To think one would want to live without a government! Blayze was eternally grateful to his great government, which let him spend as much time as he wanted doing his favorite activity—learning. Unlike the primitives, no one in modern society had to work. The great saviors of the people, the Corporations, with their vast

automated factories, provided food, clothing, and shelter for all. Citizens were allotted monthly credits by the Administration, which they used to obtain all that they needed. No one was found wanting. Freed from the chains of having to work to survive! Of course, fail to show up to a mental clinic appointment, or worse, do something forbidden, like have sex or masturbate—perish the thought—and all credits on your internal smartphone were deleted immediately and your account was frozen. No transactions were possible without the government's permission. Doing anything contrary to the government's will was a death sentence. Unless, of course, you believed in the wild stories of people making it far away from civilization to the Forest of the Real and somehow surviving in that mythical place, without the help of the corporate autofactories, without the Administration-issued credits. But that was pure nonsense. Imagine surviving without the admincreds or the autofactories of the saviors. In a real forest! Not a digital simulation of one! It was even more absurd and unimaginable than being a primitive who had to work in a factory to survive. It would be like suddenly turning into an amoeba, rolling back millions of years of evolution.

No, better to simply obey the government, Blayze thought. It's easy. The sex urge suppressing drugs were made freely available to all. And there were countless sims. Or, if you were a certain Blayze, there were endless books. He had nothing to worry about. There was no chance of him suddenly developing a rebellious streak and going out and doing something cuckoo like having sex or skipping his mental checkup. As far as he was concerned, he was living in a utopia. Why would he want to ruin that? Now, if he could just get rid of those ungovly thoughts. Maybe in the future, he thought, the government will create new technology that will remove the ungovly centers of your brain completely. That would be so amazing. Then, nobody would have to worry about anything!

Soon Blayze realized that he was standing in a large clearing. Ahead, there lay a magnificent, ivory white castle. Behind the castle, in the background, he noticed the soft pink glow of the horizon. He tilted his head up and looked at the sky above, which had turned a resplendent azure, in which a brilliant array of stars twinkled like a cosmic collection of gems.

Presently, fireworks shot up from the top of the castle, bursting into a brilliant display of red, green, yellow, pink, and purple, which floated down like pixie dust around the sumptuous, pearly white spires. On the highest spire, high atop the castle, flew a white flag with a drawing of a vagenis (a vulva with a penile shaft on top of it) covered by a red circle with a slash going through it. Everyone knew this to be the flag of asexuality. It was waved about at each of the many Asexual Pride parades, which were officially endorsed by the government.

From a balcony in the middle of the castle, there suddenly appeared Quing Alex, the official ambassador of the Asexual Pride Movement. Androgynous, Alex's appearance was neither masculine nor feminine. Alex had once, when asked in an interview, described asexself as a noman. The quing never wore tight or revealing clothing, but had also revealed in an interview that asex had no sexual organs. Asex wore a queen's dress on one side of asex's body, and a king's garments on the other side. Half of Alex's hair was long and curly, the other half short and straight. On asex's head, asex wore a jewel-encrusted platinum crown.

Blayze suddenly realized that he was surrounded by a crowd of woodland creatures, both realistic and fantastical. Rabbits, deer, warthogs, unisexcorns, genital-less fairies, toads, gnomes, elves, and squirrels edged closer, trying to get a good look at the quing. Parrots, cuckoos, bluejays, and toucans alighted on branches nearby. All looked expectantly at Alex.

Quing Alex addressed the crowd. "My dear siblings! My fellow nomen! My wonderful neutered animals of all kinds! I am here to bring you the good news. I am here to liberate you from your bonds. I am here to proclaim that asexuality is faaaaannnnntabulous!" A cheer rose up from the woodland creatures. More fireworks erupted. "My friends, every noman alive today has the freedom, nay the privilege, of being freed from that oppressive tormentor of our ancestors, sex. Almost all of the problems of ancient man were caused by sexual desire, sexual expression, sexual identity, and sexual aggression. But we today are free to create asex's own destiny…freed from the chains of instinct and biological imperatives. Soon, government technicians will have created

the absolute cure for sex, and stripped the biological imperative to have sex from our DNA altogether! Until that glorious day, stock up on free chemical castration drugs, and suppress that sex urge, baby! Don't be a slave to your hormones! You have nothing to lose but your chains!"

A cheer rose up from the crowd of woodland creatures. They started chanting, "No sex! No sex! No sex! No sex! No sex!"

Alex continued, "We are fortunate to live in such a progressive time, such a forward-thinking time, not like our ancestors, who labored under the oppression of biological imperative, lacking the drugs to free them from their instincts. And this liberation is made freely available to all by our magnanimous Corporations and our Glorious–"

Suddenly, the castle and Quing Alex were gone, and Blayze was back in the antique dental clinic, sitting in the strange dental chair with its creepy, archaic tools. The fwizzle. The scrapple. The gnome mirror. That was jarring, he thought.

Presently, Dr. Richards walked into the room, carrying a bundle of x-rays under his arm.

"Sorry to interrupt. I just thought this quaint little dental clinic you created would be a better place to talk than surrounded by all those fantasy creatures."

"No– no problem," Blayze said. It was weird how this mentist never announced himself. He simply usurped your thoughts. Annoying. Dr. Richards was not quite as tactful as Dr. Serelli. But he also had a lot of useful information, so Blayze decided to dismiss that little detail. At least the transition hadn't been as jarring as last time. Apparently their percept systems had gotten used to each other.

The mentist seated himself and tossed the stack of x-rays on the desk before him. He lifted one up and inspected it. The x-rays were of Blayze's cranium.

"What are those?" Blayze asked.

"These are how my mind interprets the scans done by the mental scaler, and thus how they appear to both our percept systems. The mental scaler conducts a noninvasive scan of all LFPs globally and constructs a mental map. That map appears to us in this place as these x-rays."

Blayze's memories of meeting with Dr. Serelli were fuzzy,

but he knew that everything had appeared completely different in those sessions, not like this. Apparently, the combination of their two percept systems had created this reality, sitting here in this dental clinic, looking at these x-rays.

"Hmmm...," Dr. Richards' brow furrowed as he looked at the x-ray. "When was your last checkup?" he asked.

"Three months ago." All citizens were required by the government to have a mental checkup at least every six months. He had learned from the Govly-Makers of his youth that the most important part of the word government was "ment," the Latin root word for "mind," such as in the words mental or mentist. A mental cleaning every six months kept the citizenry's minds govly and orderly. However, Blayze was no ordinary citizen. While the bulk of the citizenry spent their days in the sims, exploring artificial worlds devoid of sex and violence, Blayze spent his days researching, studying, pondering, reading, exposing himself to past eras, cultures and ideas. His relentless quest for knowledge never ceased. His mind took in copious amounts of information on a regular basis, not all of which was govly, especially the information from the primitive era. In the case of the simmers, the simulated worlds which their minds inhabited day in and day out were all 100% Corporation-designed and Administration-approved. Sterile. Clean. Govly. Thus, twice a year was more than enough to keep them spic and span. In fact, they could probably even go a full year without too many problems. But in the special case of Blayze, it was necessary to increase his mental checkups to four times a year, instead of the customary two.

"It looks like there has been quite a bit of mental plaque buildup in the old noggin since your last visit."

"There has?"

"Yes, there has been indeed." Dr. Richards pored over the x-rays, one after the other. Then, with a tone of seriousness, he looked Blayze straight in the eye and asked, "Do you do your mental brushing every day?"

"Yes! I hook myself in every night and do my brushing faithfully." The cervical inputs were useful for more than playing mental games with other citizens. The mental brusher was a machine installed near the bathroom sink of every apt. It was housed in the wall, with just a flat metal square surface

with two sockets exposed. Every day, the citizens were required to plug in while it downloaded updates to the XI Smartphone system which were too big to be practical using wireless.

"And what about mental flossing?"

"Well, most days..."

The mental flosser looked exactly like the brusher and sat right next to it. It was basically just a much less powerful version of the mental scaler that seemed to be based on older technology, plus lacked any sims to distract you. Each night, citizens were supposed to plug into the brusher, then the flosser. But some citizens were lazy about the flosser. It felt like having your brain scrambled around for a minute or two. Then you unplugged and hoped you hadn't forgotten too much. Blayze hated flossers.

"Blayze, fighting mental plaque is a never-ending battle. As soon as you leave the clinic, ungovly thoughts can pop up, or even worse, doubts in the government."

"But I don't doubt the government at all. I love the government!"

Dr. Richards eyed him appraisingly. "I believe that is true, but look here." Dr. Richards showed Blayze one of the x-rays. It was mostly made up of lovely, clear, white brain matter with the characteristic folds. He pointed at some areas which had begun to be mottled with tiny dark specks. "See these specks of doubt? That's not what we want. We gotta keep only crystal-clean, approved thoughts in there. Remember what we learned at Govly Academy...doubts are for louts!"

The mentist picked up another x-ray and examined it carefully. He pointed to a region which had begun to get quite murky. What looked like the beginnings of a dark cloud began to sully the clean, white cerebral tissue. "Ah, see...right here we have a PCT forming."

"A PCT?"

"Yes, a Pre-Conspiracy Theory."

"What's that?"

"A Pre-Conspiracy Theory is an accumulation of badthoughts, a.k.a. mental plaque, which haven't quite formed yet, but, if left unchecked, will no doubt harden and calcify into a full-blown CT...a Conspiracy Theory. And those are very

painful to remove, and expensive. That's if we can remove them at all. Good thing you didn't wait any longer to come to me."

So the government is monitoring pre-thought crime, Blayze realized. Not even thought crime. Not even pre-crime. Mash them both together: Pre-thought crime! Catching Pre-Thought Criminals (which were no doubt called PTCs) before they even think what they thunk. Or thunk what they thought. Or...you know what I mean, Blayze assured himself.

"Now, removing PCTs is more expensive than standard plaque removal. It involves a complex process called Future Accelerated Neuron Temporal Occlusion Mapping, or FANTOM. You see, it's not as simple as just removing a few ideas or memories. Without a detailed analysis of all possible future thoughtflows, the PCT will easily pop back up again. So in order to root it out completely, and prevent any possible recurrence, the local cerebral bubble on your head will send a request to a vast neural network which is capable of accurately predicting all possible future thoughtflows for your particular set of neurons. The whole process takes a matter of seconds, but is very labor intensive to the network, hence the added cost."

Blayze gulped. The credits on his internal smartphone were getting quite slim, and this checkup alone was going to put him in somewhat of a bind until the beginning of the month, when the admincredits deposited into the intphn implanted in his neck. Since he spent most of his time researching, and wasn't prone to brownposting on Thoughtbook, Blayze didn't have as many credits as some of his peers. Thoughtbook was the approved social media platform of the government. To post an update, one only had to think something, and then give the command to post it, and one's intphn did the rest. So much easier than the labor-intensive, archaic social media sites where one had to actually type something out with one's thumbs, at a snail's pace, and then press send. Brownposting was a term some clever chap had come up with. Well, maybe not so clever; he had been immediately lobotomized by the government after creating the term. It meant the kind of brownnosing social media posts about the government that some annoying Jills puked out of their minds on a daily basis. Of course, the bonus credit payout was minuscule, but if you

could tolerate thinking over and over in your mind how wonderful the government was for half of the day every day of your life, then it was possible to accumulate enough credits too afford a swanky meal now and then. That's why those Jills had enough credits to dine on steak and lobster regularly, and then immediately brag on Thoughtbook about it and post selfies of themselves eating, along with shots of their ritzy food, or, if they were YourLifers, make videos about it and upload them to their channel. Wow, how interesting! Watching videos about people's food. Of course, the steaks and lobster were synthetic. Genetically engineered, raised in a vat somewhere in Iowa. Nobody knew what real steak tasted like —the experience of eating was the one thing they hadn't quite mastered in the simulations—but the engineered steaks and seafood were substantially better than the almost-free TV dinners, top ramen, and peanut butter sandwiches Blayze dined on in large quantities on a daily basis. But he didn't care. He didn't need synthetic steaks. His passion, his joy, was learning, and that's what he spent his time on. The very reason he liked the government was because they freed his life and time up to do what he loved. Spending the whole day thinking to Thoughtbook about how wonderful the government was would be self-defeating.

"But how did this PCT even form? Like I said, I love the government. I wouldn't think a conspiracy theory against them."

"You see, right here," the mentist indicated an area on the scan, "these dark spots indicate badthoughts that were about to coalesce into a thoughtstream that theorized that the significantly increased adipose tissue of the modern corporate-saved man actually causes organs to fail with greater frequency, and thus is detrimental to the overall health of the body. In other words, that being a fatass is unhealthy. But of course that's patently ridiculous. Extremely high adipose levels are good for the organs. It was the starved ancient man who was unhealthy and died sooner than we do. But even if it were true, it's so easy nowadays to replace organs that go bad with artificial ones. This demonstrates the Neanderthal thinking of Conspiracy Theories. Imagining that a primitive, starved body is better than our modern amorphous, technologically advanced, sugar and chemical-enriched

corporate-food body. Sure, primitive bodies look good in the simulation, but in reality the government recommends a weight of not less than 250 lbs for a woman, 350 lbs for a man, or 300 lbs for an androgyne, which everyone knows is the most govly of sexes. Thankfully, with our high-tech, healthy corporate food, no one is even close to dipping down anywhere near those minimums."

"So I would have started thinking that theory if I hadn't come here today?"

"Absolutely. These mental scalers are so advanced that they can map out your entire thought patterns and predict subsequent thoughts at least three or four months out into the future, with about a three percent margin of error. Hmmm…." Dr. Richards eyed another x-ray, perturbed.

Blayze waited in nervous silence as the mentist carefully scrutinized the image.

"Amazing. Look at this area." The mentist indicated another area where a dark nebula was forming. "Another PCT. Looks like this one started right after you read on a website that a long time ago it wasn't possible for the government to read people's minds and so people had something called mental privacy, and also didn't have to go to the mental clinic. It even claimed people had something called freedom of thought, as if that would be a good idea!" He laughed. "But it doesn't even matter. People back then still had those horrible ancestral teeth that got cavities and had all sorts of problems. And they had to go to dental clinics, and do all sorts of stuff to fix those problems. Can you imagine? Having to put up with all that, and for what? Freedom of thought?" Dr. Richards laughed again as if the idea were totally absurd. Looking once again at the x-ray, he said, "I'd say, given another two or three weeks, this would have definitely blown up into a full grown CT."

"But…is it true?" Blayze asked timidly.

"Is what true? That people had mental privacy and freedom of thought? Of course not! But even if it were true, can you imagine life in those days? Just imagine having to get a root canal."

"What's a root canal?"

"Believe me, you don't want to know. And imagine being all skinny and emaciated and unhealthy." The mentist gave a

disgusted shudder.

"You're right. Our life is much better these days," Blayze nodded.

"I believe you when you say you love the government, but unfortunately things like Conspiracy Theories are very insidious, and can take hold of even the purest mind." Dr. Richards closed his eyes for a moment, deep in thought. Then he said, in a serious tone, "I apologize in advance. But the situation is worse than I thought. So please forgive me." The mentist disappeared. And then, suddenly, everything was gone, the dental clinic, the Meadow…

Only darkness remained.

DIARY OF THE UNSAVED: PAPER & INK

The young man, his body quite saved and roley-poley, sat on the floor of his hut. One of the unsaved had given him, as a gift, one of those primitive paper diaries and an ancient writing device known as a pen. He held the pen awkwardly, and started making scratches on the paper. It was a totally new experience for him, the process of ink making stains on paper.

After making several chicken scratches, and then graduating up to squares and circles, he felt confident enough to try a letter.

A, he wrote. It looked strange, watching the blue ink flow out onto the cream-colored flat surface, forming the letter. It seemed like he had taken a step back in time to the stone age.

B, he tried. This B didn't look so good, he decided. Neither did the A, to be honest.

He tried again.

After a few hours of experimenting, he decided that he had a somewhat workable alphabet. He could actually convert his thoughts into dyed cellulose fibers. He had a way to take ideas from his head and transfer them into the physical world.

His first entry took a long time, and it looked like it had been written by a savage, or a child learning to write for the very first time. But after he had finished, he was filled with awe at seeing his own thoughts converted into physical form, outside his brain, on an actual, physical object, not floating around in cyberspace somewhere.

He read the words with joy:

Being unsaved is so different, and yet so much better than being saved. First of all, the world of the unsaved is so much more beautiful than that of the saved. Instead of the huge concrete buildings and jammed freeways, there are beautiful trees and leaves, ponds and lakes, and woodland creatures like deer and rabbits. And the air smells so delicious. So pure, so healthy. We saved didn't realize how smoggy and full of putrid chemicals our air was. I felt like I breathed for the first time when I first stepped foot in this place.

Here, there is nobody to save us. We have to save

ourselves. They call it "work," a concept foreign to us saved. Instead of autofactories producing food for us, we all have to chip in and help cultivate the land, grow food, go fishing, hunting, etc.

It's rather difficult at first. If you're not used to it, in the beginning your body protests. The first time, I felt like I was going to die. But after the initial shock, it gets better. Soon you learn to enjoy "work." It's fun and rewarding. Now that I've gotten used to it, it actually feels more like play than work.

And the feeling of accomplishment you get afterwards feels truly amazing. It's the exact opposite of the empty feeling inside people get after spending days in the sims.

The process of saving myself is one of the most satisfying things I've ever done. And it's far easier and quicker than I had expected. Now that I've got the hang of it, I usually get all my salvation done in a few hours. And then I'm free to do what I want. I have lots of free time. That's why I decided to start a new project. This ancient diary.

CHAPTER 2: THE INSANITY OF CONSPIRACY THEORIES

Blayze found himself in a large, dark chamber. He couldn't see the ceiling or walls. He was seated at the end of a hard wooden pew. His hand rested on the pew's arm, at the end of which he noticed…a human skull! He pulled his hand back in terror. In front of him he saw many more pews. On the pews sat people in dark, hooded robes. In front of the pews he could make out a large, ornate altar, made of ebony with gold trim and a huge, red pentagram in the center. Behind the altar stood a row of robed figures, standing on a dais, facing the audience. And behind the figures on the dais, it was pitch black, except for a huge, long waterfall…of what appeared to be blood! Dark, red fluid flowed down. But the waterfall didn't stay still. It was rotating. It slowly made a 360 degree rotation, as if gravity itself were spinning.

Nowhere could he see any faces. They were all obscured by long, dark hoods. Then he noticed two lines of robed figures, sideways, walking downwards as if on invisible, black walls on either side of the chamber. When they reached the bottom of the wall, they stepped onto the floor and they shifted, now upright. They slowly marched, with a measured cadence, the first ones getting nearer and nearer to the altar. Then he noticed, that in their hands, they carried…babies! Naked, terrified, screaming babies. In the background he could hear a faint, melodic sound, a kind of ominous humming and drumming. Some or all of the hooded figures were chanting in a strange tongue.

Oh, my god, Blayze thought to himself. What is going on here? How did I end up here? He tried to will this scene away, to will himself back to the Meadow. But nothing happened. The procession continued.

One of the robed figures reached the altar. He held the baby in his arms high above his head for all to see. Then he placed the screaming baby on the altar. The central figure on the dais then lifted his hands high above his head. Blayze suddenly noticed that in his hands, he held a long, shiny, silver sword. Oh my god! He thought. They are going to kill that baby! This can't be happening. Blayze could barely watch as in one swift movement, the figure swung the sword straight down onto the altar. Onto the–

Blayze squeezed his eyes shut, wanting this scene to end. His entire life had been sheltered, safe, watched over by his

Great and Glorious Government. His protectors. The Corporate Saviors. In that moment, fright and horror gripped him and shook him to the foundations of his being. Witnessing such a gruesome act had turned his entire world over in an instant. What sort of reality was he witnessing? Violence was unheard of, and even all violent sims had been banned. Surely he couldn't be seeing what he thought his eyes just saw. He willed himself out of the simulation. Out of the mental chair. Out of this nightmare. He was sure everything would be gone—he would wake up in the mental clinic. Carefully, cautiously, he opened his eyes.

And the nightmare continued.

He was stuck, trapped here in this place. No way out. This must be hell, he thought.

He saw, and immediately wished he could unsee it, the eating, the consuming, the devouring. The robed figures were greedily feeding on the murdered baby's carcass. Blood flowed freely down the gilding of the altar and onto the pentagram. Presently, the pentagram took on a deeper and deeper shade of red, and soon it became an unholy, glowing, pulsating thing made of blood. Great drops of blood began to float off the pentagram outwards towards the audience. Those on the front pews began to greedily snatch at them and gobble them up. The figure at the center of the dais who had cut the baby with the sword took off his hood and looked out at the audience. His eyes glowed with an evil light. Dark, thick blood covered his face and dripped from the corners of his mouth. He had the look of a lunatic, a crazed psychopath actually enjoying this ritual of carnage and evil. Suddenly, to his shock, Blayze recognized the man. Nicolas Randolf. He was a famous politician. He often gave speeches on the news and talk shows on cerebralvision about how the people needed to purify their thoughts, how they needed to be better citizens, rid themselves of all ungovliness, love their Great Government with all their hearts, etc.

Suddenly, the politician spotted Blayze. He shouted, "There! In the back row! He saw us! He must die!"

Simultaneously, the rest of the audience turned to look at Blayze and started chanting, "He must die! He must die! He must die!" Blayze could now see the faces of those in the audience. Many of them were famous people from

cerebralvision. Politicians. Celebrities. Heads of corporations. Their eyes shone with a wicked light.

As they started to close in on Blayze, he clasped his hands together and prayed out loud, “Oh dear Corporate Saviors! Save me from this evil!”

He waited, and nothing happened.

He was stuck in this unholy place. Was Dr. Richards punishing him? Was this happening because of the sexy nurse thoughts he had been caught having? Had the mentist judged him to be ungovly? Or was it because of the PCTs?

He started shouting uncontrollably as a plethora of hands began grabbing for him. “Dr. Richards! Anybody! Help!” In a desperate attempt to get out of the row and into the aisle so he could flee, he tripped over the skull and landed on the floor. Masses of robed figures immediately converged on him. He put his hands in front of his face, and as swarms of black-clad figures closed in on him from every side, he screamed.

He was staring up at the blue sky. The bright, gleaming sun shone down from high overhead. A few wisps of clouds sailed slowly by. In the background, he could hear faint, peaceful chirpings of birds. He was back in the Meadow.

He had blacked out. How long had he been unconscious? He stood up groggily. He couldn't feel any pain. He looked down at his skinny body. He seemed to be alright.

Suddenly, Dr. Richards appeared, skinny and official-looking in his lab coat and glasses. He walked up to Blayze and put his hand on his shoulder.

"I'm sorry I had to put you through that. But I had no choice."

Blayze's skinny body was shaking. "You…ha–, ha–, had…no choice?" Barely capable of forming words, he tried to gather his wits. For the first time in his life, he had seen the absolute terror which was called violence.

"Yes, I'm afraid so. See, you were dangerously close. So for your own good, it was absolutely necessary to show you a glimpse of where you were headed. Don't worry, we'll erase the conscious memory of that nightmare, so you won't have to think about it. But it will stay deeply embedded in your subconscious, scaring you from ever going down the wrong thoughtpath again."

Thank god I won't remember that nightmare, Blayze thought to himself. Wait. If they erased such experiences afterwards, does that mean he had experienced a nightmare like that before? Had the mentists forced him to go through horrific experiences like that in the past, only to wipe them out from his consciousness and embed them deep into his subconscious? How did one know what one's subconscious had been programmed with?

Dr. Richards continued, "You see, what you were experiencing just now was the world that Conspiracy Theorists live in. They suffer from a condition called Extreme Paranoid Psychosis, or EPP. They imagine that the government and even the whole world are out to get them. Is that the world you want to live in, Blayze?"

"No. I never want to go through that nightmare again. It was the worse thing I ever experienced."

"That's why we gotta keep your mind fresh and clean, free

of any doubts in the government. Doubt is a dangerous thing. If left on your mind too long, it can harden and form ***mental tartar***, which makes it hard to think clearly. And if the tartar isn't removed, it can cause ***mental decay***. And that means that Conspiracy Theories are eating holes in your brain! I've seen a few really ugly cavities in my day. Truly horrendous stuff. Entire parts of your brain stop thinking completely. And pretty soon you end up in a world where up is down and down is up. That's why we need the government and the corporate media, Blayze. Their job, the reason they exist, is to tell us what reality is. Without them, the individual has no way for himself to figure out what reality really is. We are completely lost without them. That's why they call the people who work for the government on the corporate media 'Reality Mediators.' We need someone to mediate reality for us. We have no way to observe it ourselves. The individual is like a man with no eyes or ears, while the government and the corporate media are the seeing-eye dog or the braille map, the blind man's key to the world, so that he can successfully navigate that big, scary, confusing thing called reality. Thank god for our glorious Reality Mediators! Without them, we'd end up living in the topsy turvy psychotic fantasyland of Conspiracy Theorists. Have you ever seen a Conspiracy Theorist, Blayze?"

"No, I don't think so. What do they look like?"

"It depends on if their decay was caused by RWCTs or LWCTs."

"By what?"

"That's the technical term we mentists use for Left-Wing or Right-Wing Conspiracy Theories."

"But what's the difference?"

"An RWCT often focuses on racial stereotypes, for example that the entire world is run by Jews, with mental images of Jews as the archetypal villain, who, when he isn't eating babies or murdering Christians is rubbing his hands together greedily, thinking of ways to rob you of your money.

"LWCTs, on the other hand, while also capable of targeting racial and gender stereotypes, such as the evil straight white male, often focus the individual's rage, and hence their entire life, on one individual, for example Hitler or Trump. Everything that has ever happened since the beginning of time, and

everything that will happen, is directly caused by this one person, and nothing else. Thus, every moment of their being is directed at hating the effigy, or the one individual responsible for their misery.

"Now, one would think that RWCTs crop up in the right hemisphere of the brain while LWCTs crop up in the left hemisphere. But in fact, the opposite is the case, because the two hemispheres of our brain act like a mirror image. Therefore, artistic, creative types who rely more on the right hemisphere are often infected with LWCTs, while logical, mathematical people who heavily use their left hemisphere are often infected with RWCTs."

"Wow, I knew mentistry was complicated, but I never imagined all the multifarious scenarios a mentist must face in his daily work," Blayze realized.

Dr. Richards had given his explication with a gleam in his eye. It was obvious he enjoyed his work. He performed his duties with a virtuous zeal. He was the absolute expert. He was the teacher, giving out knowledge, and Blayze the pupil, imbibing it.

The mentist continued. "The mental decay caused by all types of CTs is disastrous. A total agglomeration of RWCTs will turn the human into something foul and repugnant, an inbred, incestuous, pimple-filled, cross-eyed, belligerent, cannibalistic hillbilly. They used to make horror movies about them, where some unlucky travelers got lost in the woods and then some of the local backwoodsmen appeared and chopped them into pieces and ate them all up."

Suddenly a horrific monster appeared to one side of them, something barely human, from the remotest of backwoods. Blayze took a step backwards in fright, but then realized that the mentist had simply mentated this creature up as a visual aid to go along with his lecture. The apparition just stood there doing nothing, simply breathing, its crossed eyes fixed firmly ahead.

Dr. Richards went on. "On the other hand, the totalization of the obliteration of a mind by LWCTs turns what used to be a human being into a weird and twisted thing called a cat lady, the most vile of creatures, whose mind has been folded in on itself into a twisted paradox, simultaneously hating every living thing on the planet, constantly spewing out venomous, rancid

invective, while at the same time believing they are of the highest moral caliber in the universe, a saint, full of love, acceptance, and tolerance for all."

Forthwith, on the opposite side appeared something vicious, vile, and putrid, its eyes full of insanity and hatred for every living thing. It looked ready to spew out animosity and bitterness at any soul unfortunate enough to be within shouting distance, but it too, like the other apparition, only breathed heavily and stared ahead, as if transfixed.

Upon seeing the two apparitions, Dr. Richards' mouth turned up in a smile, and he looked off in the distance, as if recalling something from the past. "You know, back before they banned violent media, there used to be this awesome show where they threw an inbred and a cat lady together in a cage and just let them have at it. They called it a Psycho Death Match. That was really friggin' entertaining. Wish they still had that show. And it was a great way to get rid of the psychos, to boot."

Suddenly the two apparitions disappeared, and Blayze and Dr. Richards were once again alone in the clover-filled meadow.

"I don't want to turn into an inbred or a cat lady."

"Then we must keep your mind clean and govly. Do you remember what your Govly-Makers taught you at Govly Academy? What does Govly Article #427 say?"

"Why, yes. Of course I do! Article #427 of our Glorious Government: 'The purpose of government is to tell us what reality is.'" That's why I can study and research stuff on the Net and not go insane, as long as I come to these checkups, Blayze thought to himself.

"And which article tells us how they accomplish that?"

"Article #572, of course." Blayze's memory of that particular lesson at Govly Academy was vivid. His Govly-Maker had driven home the point beautifully.

"And tell me what that article says."

"'The Corporate Media exists to feed us the government narrative.'"

"Amen. And that narrative is reality."

"So, I have a question."

"Yes?"

"Then does that mean the government creates reality?"

"Yes. Everything the Corporate Media declares is reality, created by the Glorious Government. The Reality Makers. Amen. You wouldn't want reality to fall out from under you, would you?"

"No, of course not. But I'm not a psycho! I don't think everyone is out to get me! Honest. I just like studying and trying to understand as much as I can about the world around me. So maybe I run across some interesting info now and then that may or may not be true. Is that bad? Is my curiosity bad? Should I just play the sims all day like everyone else?"

"Curiosity killed the cat, Blayze. Thinking too much can lead us astray. That's why we learn in Govly Academy that critical thinking is a bad thing. Why try to figure out everything for yourself when there are other people whose job it is to explain these things to you? Like the Govly-Makers. And our wonderful Reality Mediators and the politicians they interview on cerebralvision! Above all, don't veer off into unknown territory. Any knowledge that's not approved by the government is dangerous."

"I remember now on the cerebralvision the other day they were talking about a psychotic person who was painlessly ended by our Glorious Government." Blayze knew, like all other corporate citizens, that mid-grade sinners, those who committed acts against the Glorious Government, such as spreading Conspiracy Theories, were dealt with mercifully– they were painlessly ended. Quite generous of their liberal government, really. But for the worst of sinners, they weren't just painlessly ended. Theirs was a fate far worse…

"People who don't believe in government-approved reality are very dangerous to other people. So dangerous, in fact, that the government protects us all by painlessly ending them."

"But can't the mentists cure them?"

"Sometimes. But sometimes they are so far gone that even the mentists can't save them."

"So…we need the government to tell us what reality is, so we don't become psychotic and dangerous to other people, right?"

"Precisely. And it all starts with doubt. And doubt starts with information. And that's why we are here. To stop the

doubt, and stop the information, before it gets too far."

Blayze recognized this as one of the mantras his Govly-Makers had taught him in childhood. "Stop the doubt. Stop the information. Stop the doubt. Stop the information. Stop the doubt. Stop the information," they had chanted together at Govly-Academy. He was grateful to be reminded of that by this great teacher.

"Thank you, Dr. Richards. You are really good at explaining things. You should be one of the Reality Mediators or politicians."

Dr. Richards laughed. "No, those jobs aren't for me. I enjoy my work as a mentist far too much. I couldn't imagine any other job. Tell you what. Just relax. Take it easy. Enjoy yourself in the Meadow for a while. Meanwhile, I'll get to work on this mental plaque and decay, and you'll be out of here in no time. Sound good, buddy?"

"Okay," Blayze said, and smiled.

Dr. Richards gave him another clap on the shoulder, along with a friendly smile, and then disappeared.

Blayze thought about going back to the forest, but he had too many things to think about now. And he knew that as soon as the procedure was done—any moment now, really—he would forget this whole conversation. And the doubts. But the things the mentist had told him were intriguing. PCTs. RWCTs, LWCTs. Pre-thought crime. Mental privacy. Freedom of thought. He didn't need to explore the sim right now. He needed to take this one last opportunity to think these thoughts, to remember these memories, before they were wiped out forever.

Blayze found himself sitting in the mental chair at the mental clinic. The large, white cerebral bubble was whirring up softly away from his head. Around him he could see the immaculate white room, the modern terminal, the imposing mental chair upon which he sat, with its ultrastrong nanoplastic straps. A large, white, amorphous nurse was unstrapping his hands and feet.

Wait…weren't they going to…? He was confused. Was that it? Were they already finished with the mental checkup? But he had just barely sat down in the mental chair…right? And the mentist…he hadn't even come in yet.

"Is that—" he started to ask the nurse, but was interrupted by a balding, large, bloblike man with glasses stepping through the door.

"Good news!" The balding man said.

"But—" Blayze started.

The man saw the look on his face and continued. "Sorry, I forgot. We had to wipe out those memories. I'm Dr. Richards, your mentist."

"Oh." Blayze sat, dazed, as the mentist took a seat at the desk across from the mental chair.

"So the good news is…you're done! Looks like we got everything. It was a little trickier than usual, but nothing too severe. You'll get a receipt in your email. The credits have already been deducted from your intphn."

Blayze closed his eyes and subvocalized the word "menu." Immediately a menu appeared in the darkness on the back of his eyelids. He focused his gaze on a menu item reading "Bank Account." Another menu appeared. This action was called "focus-clicking." It involved simply focusing on a menu item for a moment, which was registered as a "click" or selection. The system was designed to perceive the subtle difference that occurred in the eyes when they focused on one particular item, and the eyes needed to stay focused long enough to register as a selection. He then focus-clicked on "Transactions." Yes. There was a line item for a mental checkup. Three hundred and fifty admincredits had been deducted.

"So…you are free to go," the mentist was saying.

Blayze opened his eyes. He stood up. Still in a daze, he stumbled out the door and into the hall. That was it, then.

Time to leave the mental clinic.

But then, about halfway down the hall, a thought flashed through his mind. A memory. Something he had intended to ask the mentist about.

He walked back to the doorway of the room.

"Um...I have a question."

The mentist was busily punching away at the holokeyboard on the desk in front of him. He looked up. "Oh! Okay, I'm happy to answer any questions for you while you're here. I have a couple minutes before my next appointment. Have a seat." He motioned to the mental chair.

Blayze walked over to the mental chair and reseated himself. "Thanks, Doctor. I remember something I was thinking about a few months ago, and I wanted to ask you, since you are an expert on these things. Or at least, you are the most expert person I know, except maybe my Govly-Makers, and I haven't talked to them in years."

"But, you don't remember me—to you, we just met a moment ago. How do you know I am as knowledgeable as you say?"

"You must be, in order to get such a job as mentist." Blayze said. Only the most well-educated, elite of vat children were sent to mental school and given a job of such vital importance to the government, that of cleaning and maintaining the minds of the citizens. As everyone knew, "ment," or "mind" was the most important part of the word "government."

"Point well taken." Dr. Richards smiled. Just then, a nurse walked up and pointed at a digital clockface on the xtphn display around her neck, as if to remind the mentist about his next appointment. Dr. Richards waved her away with a motion and said, "Just give us another moment, Shandi." A hint of annoyance had started to show up on his chubby face. He no doubt wanted to get this over with. But Blayze was undeterred.

"I was just thinking. Is the government a metaphysical entity? Or is it merely a group of human beings like you and me?"

Shocked, the mentist replied, "My boy, any act of questioning our Great and Glorious Government is a Conspiracy Theory." The mentist still had a professionally

pleasant look on his face, but he blinked three times rapidly. The agitation was starting to show.

"All this cleaning of our minds, what do they do it for?" Blayze realized now that he could remember hardly anything from the last three months. In fact, from the last year, or perhaps several years... His clearest memories were of his years at Govly Academy. But he knew that years had passed since then. And he had hardly anything to show for it in the way of memories. His own life was a mystery to him. All he knew was the things the Govly-Makers had made him recite over and over again as a child. "These mental checkups, they're for our benefit, right? They must do it for our benefit. That must be the reason. But, on the other hand, if they are just people like us..."

"Of course they're for our benefit." The mentist's eyes were serious now. Perturbed. As if somehow the treatment hadn't taken.

"I remember reading this book a few years ago...The Selfish Gene, by Richard Dawkins."

"Of course. I am aware of that book. Our Glorious Government allows us to read all books. But I am surprised you remember reading it. Somehow we must have missed that..."

"But if there is no metaphysical entity called 'government'... I mean, we learned at Govly Academy that primitive man worshipped metaphysical beings, like the idea they called 'God.' And we learned that we are more enlightened than they were. We have Science."

All good little vatlings in Govly Academy had memorized by daily repetition the motto of the Pluralistic Liberal Democracy of our Glorious Government: "GOD IS DEAD - LONG LIVE THE CORPORATIONS."

Blayze's face was pensive. "But if no metaphysical being called 'government' exists, than they are just a group of people like you and me. Therefore, according to the selfish gene theory, those people whom we refer to as 'government' would not act in our interest, but in their own interests, in the interests of their own selfish genes. Not ours. Just like all of us do."

"But that's preposterous! I mean...but that is..." the mentist stammered, trying to find the words. "What I want to say is

that of course there is a metaphysical entity called Government! And it shares its grace with all of us." He closed his eyes and folded his arms for emphasis when he said this. His face shone with indignation. "Simple logic dictates it must be so! If there were no deity called Government always doing that which is just, and if human beings were motivated by selfish genes, acting in the interest of their own genes and not of the group, then conspiracies would of course be possible. But we know that is not true. We know conspiracies are impossible. That would lead to an insane world were you couldn't trust politicians and government officials. Thus, any rational mind can deduce that the truth must be that the deity called Government does exist, and people do not have selfish genes. You can rest assured that all of the holy people who represent the Government and its righteous ways are walking the just path, working for your best interests, for the greater good of the species, not for their own selfish interests." He rolled his eyes. "Now, have I answered all your questions?" He said that last sentence with an emphatic disdain. It wasn't a question. It was an accusation. The facade of professionalism was slipping. But defending one's Glorious Government trumped questions of occupational decorum.

"I mean, please don't misunderstand me, Doctor. I like the people who are called the government…they let me read and study and increase my knowledge. That's all I care about. But they aren't really the government, are they? They are just people like you and me. The Govly-Makers teach us that the god our ancestors worshipped doesn't exist, that it's just an idea. But that means…government is just an idea, too, doesn't it? And the Govly-Makers teach us that the form of our government is a democracy. But democracy is the idea that the people are the government. So that means you and I are the government. Don't get me wrong. This is just a thought experiment. I am completely loyal to the government. I just wanted to ask someone intelligent about it, since most people ignore me when I try to talk to them about theoretical stuff and just go back to playing their sims. But honest, I'm a happy citizen! I love the government. I'd even like to help them if I can. That's why I love learning and getting smarter. Maybe one day I can even be of use to the government. Thinking and understanding reality are what I love to do. I mean, ***actually***

understanding reality. Not just superficially going through life without ever stopping to ponder what's happening to me. I'm so glad to have a brain and be able to use it. The act of gaining knowledge…nothing in the world can compare to that. I wish more people thought that way. But you're a thought professional! Surely you, of all people, must understand how I feel."

The nurse-cloud had floated back to the doorway during Blayze's speech. Dr. Richards barked at her, "Get me a Reality Fixer, on the double." The cloud then calmly glided away again.

Blayze had been deep in thought, but suddenly his eyes brightened up.

"You know what? You're right. I realize now that the Government is a metaphysical being, a deity that cares about us…just like the god our ancestors worshipped! Otherwise, the Government wouldn't be so beneficent! That is the proof I've been looking for of the existence of the god called 'Government.' The fact that the Corporations, the Media, and the Administration are so kind and magnanimous, that is all the proof I need! Good thing too, because if the Government weren't a beneficent metaphysical being, then it would be a small group of people enforcing their own selfish gene interests. Which would be to the detriment of the rest of us. Or even worse, a small group of people enforcing the selfish gene interests of an even smaller group of people. A pyramid scheme. Ha! Oh conspiracy of conspiracies! People acting in their own selfish interests! A small group of people benefiting from the rest believing in the idea of government. But that's not how reality works, thank Government!"

The look on Dr. Richards face continued getting darker and darker.

The cloud reappeared in the doorway, and Blayze could almost swear her white pajamas had turned grey. "Reality Fixer on line two."

Dr. Richards grunted. "You know what, forget about the fixer. I can handle this," the mentist assured. "Can you just strap him back in?"

The nurse shrugged, and then walked over to Blayze and began fiddling with the straps again.

"Yeah, a group of selfish people…how awful would that be?

They'd be hell bent on stopping the rest of us from pursuing our own selfish gene interests. Wait, is that why they allow us only one child apiece from the vats? I don't want any children anyways, they'd just be a bother. I spend all my time reading and thinking. I'm a thinker, that's what I am! Sorry, I'm the talkative type, at least when there are other intellectuals in the room. I get carried away and ramble…" Suddenly, he looked down and noticed that he was once again strapped into the mental chair. "Wait…what's going on here?"

"Before you go, just one last thing." Dr. Richards flashed a reassuring smile at Blayze. "We missed a tiny spot. This will only take a jiffy."

Wait! Hadn't they already performed the mental scaling? He didn't remember Dr. Serelli ever hooking him up again to the chair. But this man had been chosen by their Glorious Government to attend to these matters. He must know what he's doing.

"Okay, no worries," Blayze murmured as the cerebral bubble descended around his head and he was subsumed by the cloud once again.

Dr. Richards leaned his massive bulk back in the ergonomic reinforced nanoplastic chair in his private office with hands clasped behind his head and a triumphal look on his face. On his desk, an open cup of caramel pudding, a chocolate milk, and a half-eaten danish sat in front of a pair of large, sky blue holographic computer monitors displaying the cerebral scans of several patients. His eyes were closed.

I just finished my fifth lobotomy of the month, he thought. And then he thought, post. On the back of his eyelids, he could see his Thoughtbook profile. His former posts, the number of likes each one had accumulated, the avatars of his many friends. Upon thinking the word “post,” this latest thought appeared at the top of his profile and instantly the likes started pouring in. In no time, he’d have enough Thought Points to bump his double platinum status up to triple platinum.

I love this utopia, he thought with a grin.

INVENTOR'S THOUGHTSTREAM: SMARTHOME

The inventor walked into the meeting room, trying to keep the butterflies in his stomach at bay. A primitive man in a silver toga sat at a polished mahogany desk awaiting him. Actually, he knew this man was a hologram. There aren't any primitives in real life.

"Please, have a seat." The hologram motioned him to sit in a chair. The inventor gulped and sat down. He was really meeting with a Corporate Savior! He felt so small and powerless. But on the other hand, he ruminated, I shouldn't feel so insignificant next to them. They need me. I have a wealth of specialized knowledge nobody else has. I have nothing to fear, he told himself, in a vain attempt to calm his nerves.

The Savior continued. "WhirlySnake has acquired Axon Interlink. I'll be your new boss from now on."

Axon Interlink was the name of the research company the inventor worked for. But WhirlySnake…they manufactured consumer electronics. What caused them to have such an interest in his invention so as to buy the company?

"Yes, your Saviorship. Thank you for notifying me." The inventor was loyal to the Glorious Government, but he wasn't good at genuflecting in front of these corporate types, and would just as well be left alone in his lab and let others deal with the Saviors. But he also knew that their funding was necessary to his research, so unfortunately he was forced to occasionally have meetings like this. And right now was a crucial time for Axon Interlink. They had nearly gone bankrupt trying to market MindLink as a cure for neurological disorders. And funding sources had dried up. But still…WhirlySnake?

"We're going to integrate MindLink into the next generation of smartphones."

Smartphones? That came out of left field. What an odd next step. Did this mean his invention would be made available to the masses? But how would they hope to mass market MindLink at a reasonable enough price point to make it available on a large scale without compromising on quality?

But suddenly…what? What is this? He was back at his home, tinkering with household devices. His hands were small. Those

of a child. Huh? This can't be real. But he was fiddling with some wires...yes...he remembered this.

While other children had spent all day everyday on their smartphones playing worthless and inane video games, he had spent all his free time as a child tinkering, experimenting, seeing what he could make things do. And now, he was back here, ages ago, doing it again. What in the world was going on here? Why was he reliving this childhood memory?

Finally, he had finished rewiring and reprogramming the local Internet of Things network. He lived in a smarthome. Everything was programmable, and all chores could be done automatically. Things like laundry, washing the dishes, mopping the floor...there were robot appliances designed to do it all, without any human interaction other then tapping a few settings on the touchscreen in the kitchen.

He closed the panel which contained the "brains" of the network, locking the touchscreen back into place. "Ha! Now I'll be able to control the network from my smartphone while I'm at school and scare the shit out of my parents!" The inventor had grown up a long time ago, before Govly Academy, back when kids had still lived at home and gone to normal "school" every day.

Suddenly, the fridge piped up. "Summer heat been getting you down? Maybe you'd like to cool off!" All at once, the freezer door opened and began shooting ice cubes at him.

Owww!! What the hell? He was being pelted with hard chunks of ice all over his chest and arms. He turned around and ran over to the other side of the kitchen, towards the oven.

But out of nowhere the robochef appeared and grabbed him by the wrist. "You look a bit chilly there, little guy. Let's warm you up!" Nearby, the oven's digital display turned on. Four hundred degrees. He could hear the flames firing up. Then, the oven door opened up automatically, ready to receive him, and the robochef pulled him forcefully in the direction of the oven, trying to shove him inside. Shit! They were going to cook him alive! He frantically tried to pull himself loose. Finally, he jerked himself free and ran as fast as he could to the living room, hiding behind an armchair.

Whew! That was a close one.

But then, he heard a noise...

Something was coming towards him.

"Commencing daily cleaning..." He recognized the tinny voice.

Suddenly, the robovacuum sprang out from around the armchair. It was a new model with six tentacles that could quickly and efficiently clean out multiple cracks and crevices. The tentacles waved about in the air menacingly.

"You're looking a bit dirty, young man. Allow me to fix that for you!" The tentacles instantly lashed out at him.

He ran like a mad man for the bedroom, slamming the door and locking it shut. He hid himself under the bed.

But then, he heard a click. It was the door. It had unlocked itself. Shit! Oh yeah. Smarthome. It controls everything.

The door began to slowly creak open. He could hear the whir of the robochef, robovacuum, and robomaid from down the hall. They were getting closer.

Damn! This freaking house was going to kill him! He needed to get out of here. He quickly got out from under the bed and made a dash for the door.

Suddenly, all the robots were there.

As the robots clambered into the bedroom, he found an opening and squeezed through before they knew what hit them. He kept running at full speed.

Finally, he had reached the front door. He needed to get as far from here as possible. He tried the doorknob. Shit! It was locked. He frantically tried to unlock it. But of course, the smarthome didn't let him.

Suddenly the smarthome's intercom announced, "A criminal has been detected on the premises. This home will remain locked until the authorities arrive. Corporate citizen, evidence has been recorded and you have been found guilty by Insta-Trial of illegally tampering with smarthome electronics systems."

Insta-Trial! That new pilot program being tested by the government—trials held instantly over the internet by an AI judge. It was touted that Insta-Trials would save time and expense and make the legal system run more efficiently, as verdicts could be reached before the police arrived on the scene.

"Please comply with authorities," the smarthome went on.

“They will arrive any moment now.”

God damn this smarthome! What was he going to do now?

But then, suddenly, he was back in the meeting room with the hologram of the Corporate Savior, who was eying him strangely. “Have you been paying attention to a word I’ve been saying?”

He realized he had no memory at all of what had just happened in the last…how long had he been sitting there?

“I…um…I…well, you see…” He was flabbergasted. His mind was still back in the nightmare that he had just been having, while sitting there in front of the Corporate Savior.

A subtle look of suspicion and repugnance played over the Corporate Savior’s features, as if he were trying to figure out how such a revered figure, the inventor of the technology he had just purchased and apparently planned to implement on a large scale, could act like some sort of dementia patient.

Apparently, he had not made a good impression on his new boss.

CHAPTER 3: THE REALITY FIXER

Drake Lively.

The man who didn't exist.

A mind ninja.

Lurking in the shadows of your dreams.

The man who was both living and dead at the same time.

Because every day that the Corporate Saviors were alive was another day that he was dead.

Drake sighed and leaned back into the nanoplastic of his hovercar's seat as the onboard computer guided the vehicle through the Seatt-Tacoma traffic, gliding smoothly from lane to lane, dodging the other hovercars. He looked up at the grey, dreary sky.

He had heard once that in primitive times, the sky had actually been blue, just like in the ancient films. Not anymore. In the Corporate Zone, there was no sun. There was no moon. No grass, no trees, no flowers, no color… There was only the smog-filled, ashen sky above which reflected the desolation inside his soul.

Grey streets, grey sidewalks, grey buildings. As if the entire physical world around him had been cut out of the same gigantic concrete block. To escape the dead grey void of reality, most corporate citizens hooked into the sims during the commute, but since he spent all his working hours in virtuality, he needed a break. A few minutes in the real world before diving back in. Besides, let me just glory in the bleakness of my life, he thought.

His eyes were jolted awake by the shockingly colorful clown sitting on the hood of his car, smiling at him. Gaudy magenta and royal blue clownsuit. Pallid skin. Sanguineous blood-red mouth, nose and hair. The clown sat indian-style, bobbing his head up and down, swaying his pointing hands back and forth as if to a tune. He twirled his hands around each other and pointed left, then right. Then he put his hands on the hood and, transferring his weight to them, lifted his body up into an acrobatic pose. He suddenly dropped onto his stomach and reached out his hands and feet spread eagle as he pretended to fly, making goofy faces as he looked at Drake. Finally, he got up on his feet and curled his body into a canonball pose. Then he backflipped up off the hood and up into the sky above, doing about twenty backflips. Drake noticed that all the other

cars in traffic also had clowns, who all backflipped up into the sky, all to the same exact point. When all the clowns had converged into a single point, they exploded like a firework display into an enormous hamburger with three layers, the size of a small building, floating above them in the grey sky. Black, slimy grease oozed out from all the layers of the hamburger. Finally, the hamburger violently exploded into a million glittery shards which raged like a tsunami of broken glass before finally imploding upon themselves into the slick, shiny ebony words "THE GREASINATOR" which slowly revolved so all stuck in traffic below could read them. Beneath that suddenly appeared the glittering gold rotating words "Only at McArtificial's."

"Holomercials," Drake muttered to himself and went back to staring at the drab buildings as they passed by. With the clown gone, all color had drained again from the world.

If any color existed in the Corporate Zone, it was artificial. Because everything they create is artificial, he mused. Either holotechnics displays floating in the greyspace of the cityscape, or the wonderful fantasy world of the sims, which of course were nothing more than electrons running along your nerves, only existing in your mind. And of course, the endless smoldering red taillights of the traffic ahead of him.

Stuck.

Trapped.

Working, not as a human being, but as part of the system… Unable to interact, even with those whose lives he knew intimately.

I am stuck in ***their*** system. The system ***they*** created. I am part of it. I reify it every day. I build it up, strengthen it. That's why I can never be happy, he mused. I don't create the world I live in. I'm just a pawn. Like we all are. But there was no way out. Even the one thing that kept him going—his art—was all for them. For their glory. But the act of creation is better than any tonic, better than any strong drink, as an aid in forgetting one's woes. If I must create for them, then let it be.

Stuck in a system from which there was no way out except the impossible. Except the one, violent act of creation that his dead soul longed for.

All around him he was surrounded by other hovercars

threading their way in and out of traffic on autopilot, and inside, their corpulent occupants either eating fast food, drinking coffee, or hooked into the sims. And their faces…he could make out a dog, a cat, a fox, a yellow-haired cartoon primitive princess with larger-than-life blue eyes, a purple mouse with glowing blue eyes and big round ears. The generous and liberal Glorious Government allowed citizens to cover their tubby-wubby real faces with holo-faces—nearly opaque holograms projected all the way around their heads from the xtphn wrapped around their neck—because they were constantly reading the citizens' thoughts and monitoring their location using the unique government ID in their intphn, so their real face didn't matter. Some even had skinny holo-faces, which made it look like they had a primitive head on their shoulders. Drake had noticed the ancient film stars James Dean and Brigitte Bardot conversing in a holocar as he passed them up. This was possible through an advanced technology called Subtractive Holography, "erasing" the citizen's real, chubby face, leaving only the slim holographic face instead. Subtractive holography analyzed light coming in from all directions and then projected it again in all directions on the other side of the hologram, effectively passing the light through. This was what allowed the parts of the citizen's face that were larger than the holo-face to be "subtracted" from the image. Without this, their corporate-saved cheeks, jowls, and chins would have stuck out, destroying the illusion. The modern world was good at illusions. Perhaps that's all it was good at, he cogitated. After all, that's who he was.

The creator of illusions.

A ninja.

A shadow.

An erased memory, nothing more…

Outside of his work, this barren, artificial world is all a mind ninja has.

Though he didn't exist, he shaped people's memories. Though he shaped memories, care was taken to ensure he was never in any if them. If anyone had ever seen him, felt his presence, the memory of it had been erased, just like he had been from the world. From all public records, from the Net, from social media. All signs of his existence gone.

As his vehicle escorted him to his destination, he noticed a wide river out the window to the right. He imagined that it too, had once been some other color than the color of soot. As the freeway zoomed along, a looming behemoth structure came ever closer. As the structure approached, he noticed bright, fluorescent green chemicals flowing out from pipes at the base of the building into the murky river. Oh, here we go. Some color that's not virtual. Well, it was still artificial, he had to admit. It definitely wasn't natural.

The building now took up most of the view to his right. At the top of the building a sign in aqua holotype read, "FattyChemCo Corporation Chemically-Enriched Food Autofactory." And right below that, in bright green letters, "Green since 2070." Yeah, green, alright. Green like the shit you dump in the river, he thought to himself. And green like your food once it arrives on your doorstep. No one went to supermarkets anymore, of course. Food was conveniently delivered so you could stay cloistered up in your apt connected to the sims.

After what had happened to his father, his world had imploded in on him. That was twenty years ago. Twenty years ago his uncle had given him the MindLink Hacking Tools. His one hope of fighting the system. How had his uncle gotten those? But for some strange reason that was still a mystery to Drake, his uncle had soon after disappeared. Gone. Completely. Never again to return a call or message, never again to reach out to him with a friendly gesture. And the government wouldn't give him a direct reply about his existence or location. It was as if he had never existed. He knew that his uncle was the one person that could understand him, the one person he could trust. Or else why would he have given him the Hacking Tools? So why had he disappeared like that, left him all alone? Especially after what had happened to his father.

His uncle, the enigma.

He had never once met him in real life. Soon after his graduation from Govly Academy, he had received that encrypted message with the Hacking Tools, and then…nothing. He didn't know where his uncle lived or what he did for a living. The only reason he knew of his existence was because his father had mentioned him a few times, and because of that

email. Perhaps he had been ended by our Glorious Government. But then, it would have been broadcast on the Reality Mediation just like all the other painless endings by our Glorious Government. Damn his uncle. Why hadn't he been there all these years? And why wasn't he there when...

God damn it! These same caustic thoughts, day in and day out. I need to take my mind off it all, if only for a moment.

Oh sweet creator's chair, here I come.

Trying to divert his mind from the constant thoughts that were leading him nowhere, he looked out the window to his left. Now he was getting nearer to downtown, he realized as he noticed the Cyber Space Needle looming in the distance. The original Space Needle had been demolished after a huge crack comprising its structural integrity had been found. But they had created the Cyber Space Needle to replace it. A permanent, 24/7, colossal hologram. Electric blue, it shimmered with streaks of pink or yellow, or sometimes went into multi-color strobe light mode. It was a sight to behold, especially at night. And on top, also holographic, flew a giant Asexual Pride flag, bearing the vagenis with a red circle-slash through it. The government had justified their decision not to rebuild a real Space Needle by the fact that they had already created an exact replica of the original in SimWorld. Citizens are free to visit it, get their virtual pennies pressed, go up the elevator and see the view from the top, whenever they want, they had said.

SimWorld. That vast meeting place of souls. SimWorld was available through one's smartphone wirelessly, online, 24/7. Or if one wanted a hyperrealistic connection with no lag, one could plug their mental cable into the terminal inside their apartment. A virtual world, accessible by anyone at any time. Like an alternate earth. At any given moment, there were millions, if not billions of people in SimWorld.

In the dismal sky directly above Drake, a huge airship lumbered past, in the direction of the Cyber Space Needle. He watched in fascination as the glowing purple behemoth plotted its slow course. Finally, it had passed him, and he caught a glimpse of the long, black banner it was pulling behind it. On it flashed the words in bright green, "CORPORATIONS ARE SAVING THE PLANET." The display was impressive. But he knew that the giant airship, and the sign

behind it, were not real. Holograms. Is anything in this city real?

Listlessly he looked back out to the right and this time noticed hundreds of floating objects littering the mucky river. Plastic bottles, he knew, courtesy of Tarky Tarla Corporation, manufacturer of Tar Colored Liquid Sugar—known colloquially as "TarC," as in "I'll have a TarC, easy on the ice,"—and other fine beverages. Keeping citizens healthy and saving the planet by spreading their plastic bottles throughout nature.

As he approached downtown, automatic sidewalks on either side slowly transported hundreds of rotund corporate-saved bodies such as his own to their destinations, some wearing holo-faces, others not. Most of them going to work. Thanks to the holy Corporations, modern man didn't have to work. Chemically-enriched manna was made available to all through the government admincredits. But many people continued to work anyways, perhaps because of boredom, perhaps to feel useful to society, perhaps to make enough admincredits to buy a second apartment, and so on and so forth. For every one person who worked, there were three or four who simply stayed at home and lived their life virtually, in the sims, ordering food online, rarely leaving their apartments. With the autofactories, it didn't matter. There was food and shelter for all, whether or not anyone worked. The people who enjoyed the sims were happy they didn't have to come out and interact in the real world, and the people who liked to come out in the real world were happy that there were less people to interact with. The reason for gigantic population centers seemed to be, ironically, so people didn't have to interact with each other. Let's squish millions and millions of people in real close together...so they can be even more isolated from each other. That seemed to be the purpose of civilization.

Surrounded by people, but with no one to talk to. With the Hacking Tools his uncle had given him, Drake had the ability to make a stealth connection with anyone he wanted to, and hide their communications from the Glorious Government. The ability, yes. But the opportunity, no. Who could he trust? The honest answer? Not a single soul. In all frankness, he realized that any one of them was just as liable as the next to betray him to his enemies, and that meant certain death. Not a single person on earth that he could trust with what he wanted to

do. What he had to do.

But at least, because of the Hacking Tools, he could have thoughts like these. The thoughts that at once kept him alive, and kept him dead. Just like he had been every day for the last twenty years, since his world had become nothing more than a farce.

The automatic sidewalks were lined with garbage. Napkins, empty Grimy Greasy Fry cartons, paper wrappers from straws, flowed freely down the street, directed by the wind, here and there clinging to the legs or feet of a citizen. Empty yogurt cartons, plastic utensils, soda cans, Twing Twong wrappers littered the landscape. It was as if the Corporate Zone were an archaeological site, a place for future scientists to research the failures of corporations to make good on their promise to save the environment.

All of a sudden, his hovercar jerked to a stop. He looked at the road ahead of him. Another traffic jam. Ah, crap. Gonna be late again. Why can't our Corporate Saviors get us flying cars, like in just about every primitive film about the future? Late the second time this week. How was this going to look to his superiors? Maybe they'll force me to take a course in time management, he thought.

He looked out the window to his right and saw the crowds of chunky chunk chunks milling around a large fountain. And on top of the fountain, there was a twenty-foot hologram of a tan muscular man with platinum blonde hair flexing his huge biceps, sporting the shiny silver toga and shiny golden laurels and sandals which were the garments of the Corporate Saviors. The toga lacked a tunic and exposed part of his brawny chest and arms. This was the man who had given Drake his job. Ron Wolfe. Drake had never seen him in real life. The Corporate Saviors were inordinately secretive and preferred to hold all meetings either via holotransmission or in SimWorld.

In SimWorld, everyone had an avatar that looked like a starved, primitive version of themselves, including the Corporate Saviors. Just like with their holo avatars. But it was rumored that the Corporate Saviors also had primitive bodies—just like their avatars—in real life. But of course, that would be preposterous. They must have healthy, corporate-saved bodies like the rest of us, he thought. But looking at the

cheesy, grinning holo flexing for the crowds, Drake thought about the inscrutable figure he had only interacted with virtually. What do you look like in real life, Wolfe?

And so he sat there, stuck in traffic, looking at the smirking face of his adversary, as the tubby-wubbies who worshipped him flowed around the fountain. This is my world, he ruminated. ***Their*** world. And my prison. Isolated, all alone, with no allies, no friends, no one to talk to, no one to trust.

The awful, impossible task is mine and mine alone. The only task that offers me any hope of salvation.

To destroy the Corporate Saviors.

Because there is only one thing that can bring salvation.

Revenge.

Suddenly, all the roley-poleys on the automatic sidewalk had fastened on their government-issued gas masks. All at the same time, they opened up their government-issued acid-resistant umbrellas.

It began to rain.

Acid rain, of course.

Like it did almost every day.

Drake sat on the fourteenth floor of the Department of Thought Management building in a room that didn't officially exist. Those lacking proper clearance thought this was part of a bomb shelter that formed the inner core of the building from top to bottom. In reality, much of the "bomb shelter" was actively used by Government Shadow Operatives like Drake.

He had entered through the main lobby, walking over the gigantic circle inlaid in the middle of the polished marble floor bearing the symbol of Thought Management, a human brain with a profusion of circuits coming out of it. Above and below the brain, running along the circumference of the circle, was the motto of the Glorious Government: "GOD IS DEAD—LONG LIVE THE CORPORATIONS."

Then, as was required of all government employees, he had reverently approached the Holy Data Chain, which looked like a literal chain made out of ones and zeros. He held out one hand straight in front of him, with palm perpendicular to his body, representing the sacred numeral "one." Then, he placed the other hand in front and below and formed a circle with his fingers and thumb, representing the holy numeral "zero." Hands pressed together in this way, he traced with them a zero, and then a one in the air, showing deference to the Apex Data Predators. They are at the top of the chain, we are at the bottom. They feed on us by feeding on our data, by knowing everything about us, while we know nothing about them. He who knows, preys on him who doesn't know. Knowledge is power. Literally.

After his little corporate prayer he had entered the restroom and sat down on a smart toilet which recognized his security clearance wirelessly from his xtphn and activated the smart stall, which doubled as a secret multi-directional elevator which had taken him through a series of convoluted twists and turns, eventually depositing him on the nonexistent floor. Plus, he had taken a shit in the process. Modern buildings had been designed for modern man, who, eating corporate food all the time, was constantly needing to take a shit.

And now he sat staring at his boss, Albert Jenkins, a pale-faced man with a triple chin, beady blue eyes and a strawberry blonde crew-cut, who was chewing him out for being late.

The vast chamber was dim, except in the well-lit, sunken supervisor area in which they sat, surrounded by rows upon

rows of roley-poleys, tilted back in their reinforced dark grey nanoplas reclining chairs, their eyes closed, their bodies inert, their minds sifting through the Net, monitoring the badthoughts of the citizens.

The Thought Scrapers.

Most of the spying on citizens' thoughts was carried out by a super AI known as the Cloud, but even with late 21st century artificial intelligence, there still needed to be a human element to make up for the technology's blindspots.

"You're a good fixer, Andraca, but the Department depends on…" Jenkins said, searching for the word. "Well… dependability," he concluded recursively. Maybe he should have asked an AI assistant to formulate that sentence for him, Drake thought. All smartphones were equipped with various AI assistants that could help individuals evade the responsibility of thinking. Thought Obviation Programs, or TOPs, as they were called. Standardized tests had confirmed that IQs had been plummeting for decades as a result. But they kept coming up with newer and more fully featured TOPs. At the focus-click of an eyelid menu, TOPs could research a topic for you, do your shopping, compose a message for you to a friend or family member, and yes, even tell someone too dumb to think for themselves what to say in a variety of different situations. Thus, homo sapiens corporatus's natural brain became more and more atrophied as more and more tasks were offloaded to his external brain, the smartphone.

"I told you not to call me that. Besides, why don't we have tunnels like I've heard the Saviors have? Or at least some kind of high-speed vacuum tube like the one proposed by the Muskys decades ago?" Drake replied. The Muskys were a dynasty of strangely accentless eccentric Corporate Saviors from some foreign land where they always say their first name last and last name first. They were notorious for their long list of technological proposals which had all gone unrealized, even up to and including the colonization of other planets.

Suddenly, bright red holotype began blinking above one of the immobile roley-poleys with the words, "SHIT BREAK." There was a soft "bing, bing, bing, bing," sound which accompanied the flashing words. The roley-poley opened his eyes, looked around, and stood up. He seemed to have

something urgent on his mind. He meekly addressed Jenkins. “Sir, may I be excused?”

Once in a while, one of the scrapers ate too much corporate food before his shift, or on a lunch break. The scraping chair was equipped with sensors, which, when attached to the scraper’s central nervous system via his intphn, could detect bodily functions such as heart rate, breathing rate, sweat, among other vital signs. And yes, even the autonomic organic condition that signaled an imminent toilet disaster.

Jenkins rolled his eyes. “Go along. Do your business. And don’t dawdle. We have citizens’ minds to scrape!”

The pudgy wudgy form quickly and jerkily hop-waddled off in the direction of a door overhung with protruding holotype reading “RESTROOM” in such a manner so as not to precipitate a catastrophe before reaching his destination.

“God damn it,” Jenkins grumbled. “I told them to install tubes up their butt to suck out the poop, to prevent delays such as these. Anyways, Andraca, what the hell were you talking about? High speed vacuum tubes and other such nonsense? Must I remind you? What do we always say here at the DTM? Focus on what ***you*** can do, not on what others are or aren’t doing.”

He had called him that name again. It was a running joke at the Department that Drake’s name came from the Old English “andraca,” meaning “duck-king.” Drake insisted that it came from the Middle English “draca,” meaning “huge serpent.”

Drake was at this moment using his always-on ThoughtCloak (one of the handiest of all Hacking Tools) to imagine this man’s head resting on a bloody pike instead of on his fat body. Drake enhanced this glorious image even more by mentally mimicking Jenkins’ high-pitched, obnoxious voice, as the head on the pike squawked, “Andraca, blah blah blah, I’m a toady, weaselly little man whose entire career is based on his enshittened, ugly potato-shaped nose which he used to get to where he is today, blah blah blah…” Drake was always amazed at how here, in the belly of the beast, in the heart of the fortress of mind control, his Hacking Tools worked flawlessly, completely undetected by these bureaucratic, meddlesome control freaks. That was proof that the technology of the Saviors was not magic, and there were always flaws, always gaps one could squeeze one’s way through to avoid the iron-

clad rule of those who made it their business to spy on and control every aspect of every person's life. Or maybe, that meant that technology ***was*** in fact magic, and since all magic was based on the knowledge of certain magic words, all that was needed to outmagic one's opponent was to know the right magic words…the right code.

"So I was five minutes late. Something went wrong with the traffic AI again. How is that my fault?" Drake was an artiste. How could they expect an artiste to wear a suit and tie an show up at 9 and leave at 5? Actually, Homo sapiens corporatus, who sweated much more profusely than his ancestors, had long ago given up on ties and starched collars, in favor of more amorphous, loose-fitting garments. White flowing silk shirts with loose faux-collars were fashionable among business-types.

"Look, I'm going to have to submit your file to the Saviors for review."

Drake knew that fixers were hardly ever retired from their profession, since there was about a three to six percent chance their erased memories of being a fixer would resurface. This was a major security risk since fixers were not supposed to exist. Citizens knew about the mentists, about the memory erasure. But they didn't know about the deceptive and illusory work fixers did behind the scenes with their memories. Once in a long while you'd hear of a fixer who blundered on a major case being painlessly ended, but major cases were rare, and fixers being painlessly ended was even rarer. The result was that being a fixer was almost a tenured position. A tenured position where you could play around with people's memories.

Just then, a life-size hologram appeared, sitting in a ghostly chair in front of Drake and Jenkins, as if it were an apparition. Savior Ronald Wolfe. The chiseled features of his translucent holo avatar and its sinewy muscles partially exposed by the shimmering toga contrasted sharply with the rows of unconscious amorphous blobs visible directly behind it. Suddenly, the meeting of two had become a meeting of three.

"Salve, my Savior," Jenkins spouted obsequiously. "I was just explaining to Department Employee Lively that we should recommend his file for review to the Corporate Saviors based on his temporal unreliability of late—"

"Can it, Jenkins. I have a better idea." Wolfe's immaterial

form turned slightly in its chair to face Drake. “Drake, I have decided to entrust an extremely crucial assignment to you. It is imperative that you treat this case with kid gloves. The name of the patient is Kristal Silverberg. It seems for some reason an especially strong cathexis has formed around a certain memory, one incongruent with our system of Corporate Salvation. I’m counting on you to remedy that problem for us.”

Wait…***the*** Kristal Silverberg? The glorious Reality Mediator? Drake watched her broadcast on cerebralvision every night at 9pm. Drake had been assigned to important people before, Govly Makers, lesser bureaucrats, mentists…but never to a mediator, a celebrity adored by the public.

“But your Corporateness—” Jenkins began.

“Zip it, triple-chin! The matter has been decided. I’m sending the preliminary report to your smartphone, Drake. And Lively, don’t mess up on this one. If you fail, I’ll have to do it myself. And I run a very tight schedule. I’m sure you can appreciate that.”

Huh? He would have to do it himself? Who ever heard of a Corporate Savior taking on a Reality Fixer’s case? Drake knew that Wolfe was the founder of WhirlySnake, the company that manufactured the MindLink-equipped smartphones as well as the Thought Management hardware used by the fixers. Drake’s uncle was somehow involved. The only reason Drake knew this was that his uncle had been the one who had recommended him to Wolfe before he graduated from Govly Academy—that was how he had become a fixer. Why his uncle had recommended him, he didn’t know. In modern society, the vast majority of people never met their family until they turned sixteen and left Govly Academy. So he had been a “baby” when all this had happened. Wolfe had given him the job, and Jenkins, the Deputy Director at the DTM, this officious, irritating asshole, had been his boss ever since. Twenty years of putting up with this royal prick, and, on very rare occasions, meeting by holopresence with Savior Wolfe himself.

Since passing the baton as CSO of WhirlySnake, Wolfe had taken over at FattyChemCo, but was still on the Board of Saviors at WhirlySnake. WhirlySnake basically ran the Department of Thought Management. Or was it the other way around? Nobody really knew, so close was the relationship

between the government and the Corporations, and so high the degree of collaboration. Regardless, how did it make sense for a Corporate Savior to take on a relatively minor task like reality fixing an individual, even one so high profile as this?

"But why you? Aren't there other fixers?" Drake blurted out, without even attaching any honorific titles, as was usually done when addressing a Savior. Drake knew he would be able to do the job, but found this situation very strange.

"Drake, remember. Focus on what ***you*** can do. If you can't do it, there will be repercussions; that's all I can say. Now, if you'll excuse me, I have some very important corporate business to attend to." He looked at Drake one more time, dead in the eyes as his voice emphasized, "Don't fail me, Drake." The hologram of Wolfe abruptly shrank down to a point of light, then disappeared.

As Drake was left staring at the rows of placid, immobile chubby wubbies in their gently reclining chairs, he cogitated. Damn it! This was on purpose. Surely, Wolfe knew that Drake felt complacent in his position. Now he would have an excuse for severe punitive action if Drake somehow failed this special assignment. So it's a test! This man Wolfe was known to be a conniving, plotting, manipulative overseer. As an unrivaled player in the game of life, he always did it in a way that made it impossible to argue with. Well played, Wolfe. This was far worse than any Corporate Savior review or time management course. How did he know he wasn't being set up to fail? Now my job is in danger, and it's Wolfe's fault, Drake thought. That arrogant bastard!

Suddenly, another one of the reclining chairs had the gently binging words "SHIT BREAK" flashing overhead. The scraper of said chair, a fleshy man with sunken eyes, suddenly woke up, a look of shock, confusion, and dire need on his face. Sometimes the transition from scraping the surface of the minds of the citizens to real life could be jarring. "Sir—" he addressed Jenkins.

But before he could even continue, Jenkins already grunted and waved a hand at the roley-poley. "You're excused," he muttered.

The man thanked him and hobbled off towards the shitcan.

The young man had lost a few pounds, his body not quite as roley-poley as before. He took out his paper diary and started writing in it again:

The food and water here are so amazing. The food comes from the ground, from our own gardening, or from hunting in the forest. The fruits are sweet and delicious, the veggies are flavorful, and the meat savory and hearty. Everything is 100% fresh. No chemicals, and it doesn't cause problems for your digestion. I used to spend the whole day on the can, back when I was eating corporate food. It was horrible. Now I have no digestion problems. I guess we Saved Ones never realized that our food tasted like chemicals; it wasn't until I ate pure, natural food here with the Unsaved that I realized this. Even more importantly, I *feel* amazing. I have ten times as much energy. And I'm losing weight every day.

And the water here…I never imagined I'd rave about water! But we get water straight from natural springs, and it truly is the most refreshing and sweetest thing I have ever drunk. I can't imagine ever going back to drinking corporate soft drinks like Mountain Spew or Tarc again. That stuff is the most artificial, toxic crap ever created!

I did go through a period of withdrawals, of course. Corporate food is a drug. Quitting corporate food is something like quitting crack. But now, my cravings for corporate food have completely gone away, and I enjoy eating more than I ever have in my life. The food is ten times more delicious, and my body feels so powerful and full of energy. My vitality and my sense of well-being keep growing and growing. It's like I'm getting younger every day. No wonder people in the Corporate Zone have so many diseases like diabetes, cancer, strokes, and heart attacks. Ha! To think their Corporate Saviors are saving them from bad health! Ridiculous. Try coming out here and living among the Unsaved for a few months. I guarantee you'll instantly become ten

times healthier than you've ever been in your life.

The Unsaved live in total accord with nature. Nothing the Unsaved do destroys the environment, while everything the Saved do destroys the environment. The holy autofactories put poisonous chemicals in the air, and also in the food which ends up not only in our bodies but also in our sewage. The holy Corporations produce megatons of wasteful plastic packaging which ends up in the oceans, the lakes, the rivers, and landfills. The Corporations' drugs also have toxic chemicals that end up in the water, through people's urine, etc. Here, nobody throws plastic bottles into the rivers and lakes. All their garbage is organic and goes right back into the natural cycle.

The rain here is refreshing and pure, not that horrible acid rain. Every time it rains, I go out and let it pour down on me. Clean, pure, unmolested water to wash away all the toxins and poisons from the Corporate Zone. It snowed here for the first time the other day. Everything is so beautiful and white. One of the women made me some warm clothes for the winter.

On a personal note, the people here are so nice and friendly and accepting. We often walk by the lake and talk for hours. They all treat me as if I were family. Among the Saved, my neighbors had always treated me like total strangers. In fact, most of the time in the Corporate Zone I never even knew who my neighbors were. Millions of people crammed into a giant megalopolis just so that they could all stay apart, alone, isolated. But here, everything is different. There aren't as many people, and we aren't as crammed together, but we all feel connected. It feels so amazing to be part of a community, part of a large family.

Before I came here, I had expected something totally different. Antagonistic people who don't fit into society. Rebels. Misfits. What I found was the exact opposite. Sociable, agreeable, completely peaceful people whom you wouldn't mind having as neighbors. These people aren't rebels. They are not rebelling against any system. They don't complain about being oppressed. They aren't inciting violence against the

government. They aren't burning down buildings. They aren't fighting a revolution. Instead, they've simply created their own system that gives them the freedom they desire.

That's all you need to do. Instead of complaining about a system you don't like, simply find like-minded people with the same values and desires and create your own system that works the way you want it too. That's what these people have done. It's genius.

CHAPTER 4: THE FOREST OF MEMORIES

Drake walked into the small office at the Rosewood Mental Clinic. He held a boxlike thing with a handle in his meaty hand. At a desk typing on a holographic keyboard sat a balding, blobular man.

"Dr. Drake Lively?" the blobular man asked.

"That's me." Drake responded. Dr. Drake Lively, R.F., he corrected silently. But he knew that the mentists usually liked to avoid making any reference to his job title, because they'd only have to erase it later from the memory of any patients nearby who had happened to hear.

"Dr. Richards. Nice to finally meet you." He stuck out a hand, and Drake shook it. The look on the mentist's face showed he was humbled to meet one of the Seatt-Tacoma's elite thought management professionals. "And this is the patient, Kristal Silverberg." He motioned towards the body of a blobular lady strapped into the mental chair. Her head was not visible, consumed by the white cerebral bubble. So this was the illustrious cerebralvision star. Her body, of course, was disappointing. Not the slim primitive one that showed up in one's mind when watching CRV. But still, there was always a peculiar feeling in the air when one met a celebrity, even if one knew they were just a normal human being like the rest of us. How ironic that he would meet her this way, under these conditions, such that she would never see him, never even be aware of his existence. Actually, it wasn't ironic. It was the life of a Reality Fixer.

Dr. Richards continued. "As Shandi probably informed you, she is suffering from a repressed childhood memory resurfacing. An inappropriate memory. I removed it at her last visit, but it came back up." He waved his banana-like fingers at the holographic screen. "Here is her full report and LFP scans. Is there anything else you need from me, or anything I can help with?"

"No, I think I'm good. If I need anything, I'll holler."

"Excellent, Doctor. I'm gonna go check on another patient. Let me know if you need anything."

Dr. Richards got up and exited the room.

Drake walked over to the desk with the glowing blue holographic screen which displayed the full readout of the patient's data. Next to the small white hemispherical terminal

he set down the boxlike thing in his hand.

The Reality Cube.

While the original Reality Cubes were ten-foot, immobile affairs, back when there had been only one to a city, the modern Cubes were about the size of a briefcase, except in the shape of a cube, with a handle on top. The dark metallic glass surface of this, the latest model, was constructed from a palladium-based microalloy, one of the strongest materials on earth. Along the edges of the Cube ran an ultrapolish chrome electroplated titanium cylindrical exoskeleton, with a handle of like material up top. There were three chrome buttons on either side of the handle. A mysterious soft glow pulsated from somewhere deep within the metallic glass. He pressed one of the buttons. Immediately a myriad of muffled clicks and whirs could be heard, as if dozens of servos had been engaged, and a soft hiss was emitted as the Cube suddenly expanded, nearly doubling in size, a maze of large cracks appearing, which served as ventilation canals. The Cube now activated, snaking pinprick blue lights roved about the black sheen of the metallic glass exterior. And through the cracks could be seen more clearly the mystical dance of sparkling light from within.

The Reality Cube employed only the most advanced, secretive technology, kept well out of reach of the normal consumer, reserved for clandestine government agencies only. It utilized the fastest portable processing unit in the world, the QUBIT—or Quantum Universal Binary-Integrated Ternary—processor, which used ternary quantum processing to wrangle binary data, increasing the speed with which data could be dealt with by orders of magnitude. The QUBIT generated a significant amount of heat, and thus this transformable configuration had been employed, allowing for maximum airflow in and around the processing unit. It also employed SDNA or Synthetic DNA memory, the fastest type of memory ever developed. Though it officially didn't exist, the Reality Cube was easily a hundred times more powerful than a single mental scaler.

From one end of the Cube he pulled out two ultrapolish chrome cables and plugged them into the terminal on the desk, and from the other end he pulled out two more cables, and plugged them into the two jacks on either side of the

horseshoe-shaped xtphn surrounding his neck—his cervical inputs.

He sat down in the reinforced chair and closed his eyes.

On the back of his eyelids he could now see everything that was on the holographic terminal monitor—the LFP scans, the patient history, Dr. Richards' notes. In addition, he saw a gleaming, floating cube off to the top-right corner.

Now he could verify that, yes, this was the famous mediator, Kristal Silverberg. She looked so amazing on cerebralvision, even more fantastic than the other mediators, who were usually chosen for their looks and their loyalty to the big GG. In fact, he sort of had a crush on her. But now, looking at images of her real-life, corporate-saved body, not the primitive avatar all the stars used on cerebralvision, he confirmed that she was—as to be expected—disappointing, to say the least. She's just another chubby chub face and chunky chunk body, like the rest of us, he lamented. Oh well. Such is life in the Corporate Zone, where all that glitters is false gold. He was used to it.

After briefly reviewing the data, bringing himself up to speed on the case, he focus-clicked on a button that read "Distraction Simulation." Instantly four rotating 3D images representing his options filled his view.

Mentist sessions were relatively short affairs, and the mentists usually did all their work while their mind was disconnected from the patient's, and only connected briefly to explain some things or to indoctrinate the patient. But the fixers' work was much more complicated and therefore more time consuming, sometimes requiring several hours for a single job. Furthermore, it was necessary for their mind to be connected to the mind of the patient the entire time. Since it was necessary to keep patients unaware of their presence that whole time, and since, if patients realized that someone was connected with their mind and tinkering with it, there was a risk of the patient becoming mentally agitated or trying to disconnect, the Distraction Simulation had been devised.

The Reality Cube, upon activating the Distraction Simulation, shut down the part of the patient's brain that made them aware that they were, in fact, in virtual reality. In other words, the patient had a kind of temporary amnesia, forgetting they had come to a mental clinic, and woke up in

what they perceived to be real reality, but which was actually a simulation chosen by the fixer to keep the patient pacified during their procedure. This, to prevent them from flipping out and trying to disconnect. Immediately after the procedure, the fixer then erased the memory of any of this happening, their last memory being coming to the mental clinic. All of this was necessary to maintain the absolute secrecy of the existence of the fixers, and to allow the fixer to access the patient's brain long enough to do their work.

The Distraction Simulation was a much more elegant solution than chemical sedation, which had been used in the early days, since all that was needed was the Cube itself, and there were certain undesirable effects when linking to a mind that had been chemically sedated.

Drake looked at the rotating options of AI-generated Distraction Simulations. Below the options was a button that read "Custom Simulation." The Reality Cube had automatically generated the four options from material taken from the patient's memories. He knew that if he wanted to, he could tweak several parameters and keep generating as many as he wanted until he found the perfect one, or create his own fully customized simulation, but the automated ones suggested by the Cube usually sufficed. He focus-clicked the second option.

A bar appeared and began to fill up. After a brief moment, the words flashed on his eyelids: "PATIENT SUCCESSFULLY SEDATED."

The patient's mind was now trapped inside a completely realistic simulation. Since she didn't know she was in a simulation, she wouldn't try to break out, nor would she be able to even if she tried. He had just finished the process fixers referred to as "sedating" the patient. With the patient now sedated, he was free to work on her mind for as long as he needed to.

He turned his attention to the glowing cube in the corner. The cube looked like a sort of Rubik's Cube composed of several rotating components, each composed of several moving images taken from the patient's life. The Reality Matrix. He focused-clicked on the cube.

Suddenly, he was no longer looking at the backs of his eyelids, no longer viewing patient data, no longer in the Rosewood Mental Clinic.

He sat on an invisible chair in the middle of a black void. His body was no longer roley-poley, but was extremely well-built. Broad shoulders, muscular—the body he would have if he were a primitive man hunting mammoths or working in a steel factory. And instead of a loose business shirt with a faux collar, he was wearing a light blue primitive button-up shirt and black slacks.

Around him, in the void, hundreds of video images—scenes from the patient's life—lined up in rows, stacked one on top of the other, stretched all around him, enveloping him in circles. Drake reached forth with his arms out into the darkness. And then, with the grace of a conductor easing into a symphony, he began gently nudging, gently guiding. The rows of video images started moving. They were under his control. With a flick of the wrist or a slight motion of the fingers he could scroll through the infinite chains of moving images wrapping around him. Presently, the rows of images were spinning all around him as he sifted through his patient's life. These images…they were the patient's memories, processed by the QUBIT processer of the Cube and presented in this digital space inside Drake's mind. All the people she had ever met formed a row on the top. Below that was a row of all the places she had ever visited. Still further down were all the objects the she had ever seen or handled. Below that, there were three more rows, which came not from the patient's memory, but from the Reality Cube's internal storage. Stock people. Stock places. Stock objects. All ready to be modified, adapted, inserted seamlessly into the patient's memories.

And at the very top of the darkness, above all the other scrollable rows of images, sat the most important row: the LifeLine. A chronological timeline of every memory the patient had ever had during their life.

This is where the artist did his work.

This place was the artist's chair. And the infinite things swirling around him were the artist's palette. And what the artist did was create memories. This chair, this palette, and these images had a collective name.

The Reality Matrix.

Matrix. The Latin word for "womb." This was where the artist gave birth to new memories, which in turn gave birth to new realities.

Drake knew that the human organism doesn't live in reality, as perceived by the external senses. Rather, the human mind is constantly superimposing its "reality," based on memory, over the data it receives from the senses. Thus, each person's reality is based on their memories.

This was what made memory manipulation so powerful. People trust in—want to believe in—their own reality—their aggregated memories, arranged into a model representing the external world—more than in the actual external world around them. Memory is where the individual stores all information about the outside world, whether it be indoctrination, wild ideas, or evidence-based logical models about how that world works.

And now, memories were changeable.

Change the memories, and change the reality.

As the images swirled around him, he drank in deeply of Kristal Silverberg's life. The woman who he watched every night, wearing a fake body, wearing a fake face. This woman who he would never see again. This woman who would never know he existed. But none of that mattered, because this place was the one place he felt at home, the one place he was happy, the one place he was at peace.

This is what Drake lived for.

This was what kept him sane.

Living his life with the double memory of his father's death, the false one superimposed over the real one, both of them playing back constantly in his head since he was a teen, just out of Govly Academy. The years of pretending to love his Glorious Government. The years of outwardly praising his Corporate Saviors. This was the one thing that could console him, give his life meaning. Creating. He was an artist, and the artist's only consolation ever was, ever would be, his art. In a world of lunacy, an artist should never expect anything more than that.

His father had been a dreamer. He had believed in a place that didn't exist. And it had cost him his life. This Corporate World is all there is, Father. To exist outside it is a pipe dream. For all his artistry, Drake wasn't a dreamer. He was a realist. He was pragmatic. There was only one answer to a tyrannical system. For twenty years he had plotted it out, thought about

every practical detail. Even while existing, breathing, surviving inside that system. Nay, serving it, facilitating its existence, helping it to continue.

Okay, he thought, now let's see this demon that is haunting you, Silverberg. And then, my dear little mediator, my dear little star, I'll create my masterpiece. My perfect memory. Your perfect memory. My gift to you. Drake treated each patient not as a patient, but as the one to whom he was dedicating his mental objet d'art.

Before creating a convincing memory, it was necessary first to review the available assets—the tools he would work with. And then to relive the patient's actual memory. He had to understand what he was dealing with. His job was to partake of the ungovly, to dirty his mind with the taboo memories of others. And then, only then, after comprehending the depths of evil, the depths of inappropriateness and uncorporateness, could he create for them a light that would squelch out the shadow. The offending memory was the negative to his positive, the yin to his yang. He would fashion, build up, a work of art that would convey exactly the opposite meaning of this memory that needed to be repressed, and thus would "correct" the patient's subjective reality, bring it in line with the holy Corporate reality. Before he could do so, he needed to first be intimately acquainted with the demon he needed to thrust back down into the abyss of the unconscious.

He raised up his arms and with gentle, controlled flicks of his wrists which attested to years of practice he began to speed-scroll through the patient's LifeLine—a lifetime of memories at his fingertips. With so many images to choose from, he had to shape and caress, zoom in and out, drag here and there to find what he was looking for. He knew that in the Rosewood Mental Clinic his body sat inert, as if sleeping, his arms hanging limply to his sides as he sat in front of the terminal. But here, in the Reality Matrix, he looked like a maestro leading a concerto. He flew past the years, through adulthood, past adolescence, then on into childhood, the place where most problematic repressed memories were apt to be found. He flicked and flitted through the literally thousands of images with the finesse of an artiste. And then…Yes, here it is. The repressed memory which has ruptured through. Repressed, but not gone. Erased, but not forgotten.

Drake knew that although modern mentistry had advanced leaps and bounds over the last decades, it had its limitations. Its main shortcoming was that it focused mainly on the conscious mind. The technology for probing unconscious data was still in its infancy. It would probably be decades before man-made machines had delved completely into the seemingly bottomless ocean that is the unconscious. So mentists could remove memories all they wanted, but if the cathexis surrounding that particular memory was strong enough, the unconscious would spit it back up into consciousness, and there was little the mentists could do about it. On a day to day basis, this was rarely a problem, but once in a while a repressed memory would burst into consciousness, throwing a wrench in the work of the mentists. The Reality Fixers were needed in a variety of different problem scenarios, and this was one of them. They were the elite Thought Managers who handled problems the mentists couldn't solve. In the case in question, in order to once again suppress the memory, and get it to stay down, it was necessary to create an even stronger memory that filled the same part of the patient's psyche, shifting the libidinal energy from the badmemory to the goodmemory, and thus causing the repressed memory to be forgotten, forever sunk into some deep trench on the seafloor of the unconscious.

Ironically, this was precisely the thing a Reality Fixer had tried to do for Drake when he was sixteen years old, after the murder of his father, the memory of which the mentists couldn't keep down. But the Reality Fixer had failed. The memory was too poignant, too full of affect. The fixer hadn't been artistic enough. That's why there were so few fixers. The required set of aptitudes was so rare, the innate ability to create believable, full-of-affect memories so uncommon, that few qualified for the job.

Oh shit! It's happening again…

His father.

One leg out the open window.

He looked back at Drake.

The look of sorrow, of helplessness in his eyes.

The image clear, vibrant.

Dashing towards his father, wanting to help…

"Father, no!"
"Good bye, Drake."
And then…
Falling.
Running to the window.
Looking down.
Their apt was ten stories up.
His father's tiny figure, below…
No!!!! Father!!!!
Suddenly jolted into a new scene…
Everything blurry…
Nebulous, indistinct…
The man in the black visor…
Making the call on his wrist…
The distorted face in the hologram…
The garbled voice giving the order…
And then the short bursts of blinding light…
The twisting, the turning, the writhing…
The searing.
The charring.
The shrieking.
The mutilating.
The horrible screams of death…
The awful remains…
Not even flesh anymore…
Not even blood…
Just blackened, charred stumps…

With a shock, Drake was back, sitting in the Reality Matrix, looking at the patient's LifeLine. How many times had that happened?

From the second memory only one phrase had been clear: the man with the black visor had said "your Saviorship." One of the Saviors had given the order.

Though a fixer whom he had never met had tried and failed to fix his memories, he himself had gone on to become a fixer. Left with the scars of that failed job permanently etched into his psyche. Not only had he become a fixer, but he had become one of the best fixers. He worked for the government, successfully doing for others what they had failed to do for

him. The irony of that didn't escape him. But paradoxically, he loved his job—he loved creating for them. Not because he loved the Saviors, but because he loved the act of creation.

Would his life have been better if the fixer's false memory had succeeded in suppressing the real one? Would he be happier believing in the rosy lies of the government, of his Corporate Saviors, thinking, like most people, that he lived in a utopia where they were protecting him? Or was it better to know the harsh truth? Was it better to be a pig satisfied, or a man unsatisfied? It was a paradox, one he could not answer. But the question was academic. The double memory had remained, and he had lived since a teen, with this weltschmerz.

Repressing memories wasn't the only thing fixers did, of course. There were some patients who didn't have any reactivated memories that needed repressing, but whose love of their Corporate Saviors had simply waned, who needed some carefully crafted false memories to guide their libido back to the GG (the Glorious Government). Yes, even in this supposed asexual world, their libido. That word that moralistic people since the time of Freud had hated, and which had been taken out of Govly Academy courses on psychology. The fixers, however, as part of their job had to know the secret that was hidden from the public—that humans were sexual beings. They had been given secret training which had gone into great detail on the matter. The gist of it was that in order to maintain a totalitarian state—which of course, the fixers were assured, was necessary to maintain order in society—the libido, instead of being fixed on a sexual object, needed to be fixed on the "fearless leaders." Das Führerprinzip. The fearless leaders needed to be the source of all psychosexual pleasure to the masses. Thus, while supposedly being asexual, the citizens were in reality in an incestuous relationship with their government, who took the place, not only of their father as provider and protector, but also of their lover. Thus, the goal of all Reality Fixing was the focusing of the libido on the fearless leaders. This meant the politicians, and above all, the Corporate Saviors. All memories were constructed with this goal in mind.

All women, even ones who were supposedly happily married, were having an affair with their Corporate Saviors,

with their Glorious Government. All men were too, to the degree that they saw their Corporate Saviors as the source of their happiness: their food, their shelter, their well-being. But the sexual overtones were often easier to spot in women than in men. Women were attracted to men both with the power to provide the means of life, and to take it away. In other words, to kill. Women had always been attracted to killers. Such as the primitive police. And now the Corporate Police, or corpols as they were called. But even more so to those pulling their strings. The monopoly of violence was a fascist pyramid of puppets. The strings of the police were pulled by the politicians, and the strings of the politicians were pulled by the Corporate Saviors, because it was the Corporate Saviors who paid the politicians' real salary, not their token salary paid by the citizens.

Controlling citizens by controlling their libido. In the early twenty-first century, a new project to this end had been initiated. Of course, every push for totalitarianism must begin by disguising itself as a push for freedom. The government and the corporations, in unison, had begun experimenting with using the swapping of one's gender to entice the masses to fall into a sexual relationship with their "liberators." The government had begun to talk about sex incessantly, as if it were their business what private citizens did in their free time. They approached it in a roundabout manner, pretending to give the private citizens the freedom to do what they want. In reality, people had always had the freedom to do what they want, and didn't need politicians or corporations to give them permission. In fact, it had made no sense from the beginning, least of all to people who actually wanted to change their gender. Once you hand over the power to someone else to give you permission to do something, you also hand over the power to them to take that permission away. By accepting the frame of someone who needs permission, you lose freedom, you don't gain it. You become the dependent child, and the other becomes your parent, holding the power to decide what you can or can't do.

But surprisingly, the ruse had worked. The citizens began to look, not on themselves as free human beings who can do what they want, but on their government and corporations as the source of their sexual freedom, of their sexual pleasure. It

was crude, but it worked…to a point. Over the decades to come, the government had perfected the technique. The Asexual Pride Movement was its magnum opus. Now the citizens' sexual bonding to the government was complete. The sole source of their sexual pleasure was no longer a person, but an idea. The government. A group of people, no single individual. With advances in automanufacturing technology, all sources of pleasure were now provided by the government: food, a place to sleep, the sims for entertainment, and the sexual need taken care of by the incestuous psychosexual relationship with the government. Denying themselves sex, because all that sexual energy was to be reserved for their fearless leaders. Even to have children the citizens were dependent on the government.

Thus, they were slaves.

Enslaved not only by the violence of the corpols, but by advanced psychological techniques of which the public had no knowledge.

Just like a woman will trust in and stay with the man who lies to her and abuses her if he is the love-object of her sexual energy, so will citizens trust in their fearless leaders once their fearless leaders have become the object of the citizens' libido, regardless of how badly they are treated. Citizens in love with their government will put up with any manner of abuse, even the reading of their thoughts and forbidding them to have sex.

Ergo, in order for the citizen to believe whatever their Glorious Government tells them, and to remain loyal and true to their government, the one sole requirement is that all the citizens' libido must be focused on the government as the sole love-object. And that was what Drake was here to do. That was his job. To make the patient give all their love, all their psychosexual energy, directly and unconditionally to their Glorious Government and Corporate Saviors, and no one else.

I'm sorry, Father. I'm sorry for working for them, for being part of their system. But I promise to avenge you. I promise to tear this warped, hypocritical system apart, piece by piece, even if it kills me.

He pulled his hands apart, stretching out one particular memory on the LifeLine to fill the black void in front of him. It grew larger and larger, filling every space around him, and as it did, trees began to pop up, one at a time, filling up the

memoryscape.

He was being transported, he knew, from the Reality Matrix into the Forest of Memories. Each citizen had their own MindWorld, which represented the various parts of their psyche. In order to relive Kristal's offending memory, Drake had to visit her Forest of Memories, that place in her psyche where she housed all her memories.

He was now ready to experience the evil, the offending, the inappropriate memory.

Behind some trees Drake spotted a primitive, voluptuous, red-haired woman. Her hair was wet, and she wore nothing but a towel. He walked closer to the trees for a better look. He moved some branches out of the way and now had a perfect view of the woman. He could see her, but she couldn't see him. He watched as she hummed to herself and looked into a mirror on the wall. Her body was shapely, primitive, sexy. Drake knew that what he was seeing was how the memory was interpreted in this place, in the patient's MindWorld. That's why here in this forest both he and the lady had skinny bodies, not their corporate-saved, roley-poley ones from real life. The humming lady took off her towel, exposing two enormous, supple, voluptuous breasts.

Holy mother of…

Drake gulped, his eyes taking in the sight.

She began applying lotion to her naked breasts, with her beautifully manicured hands which had bright red nail polish. She kept lathering her silky smooth body and those amazing bare, jiggly breasts. Her nipples started to tumesce. She was getting excited. Hmm…Was she thinking badthoughts? She turned around, still looking at herself in the mirror, exposing two silky smooth, round bare ass cheeks, and began rubbing the lotion into them, caressing her beautiful ass with her lovely hands. Finally a bed appeared and she walked over and lay down on it.

Drake walked closer, passing some trees, moving branches aside as he walked. He needed a better vantagepoint. He kept walking towards the naked lady lying supine on the bed until he was a few scant yards away.

The lady had begun caressing herself, feeling her own smooth flat belly, her shapely hips, her shoulders. She began

playing with her huge breasts, fondling her perky nipples. He could feel himself starting to get aroused. Good thing his corporate-saved body back in the clinic had enough ample adipose so that his huge belly would cover any erection. He hadn't taken the government hormone-blockers since youth. The Hacking Tools helped him spoof his government records so it looked like he had been taking them, just like they made it look like his mental checkups and flossing were up-to-date. So, unlike the rest of the men in corporate society, he was able to get it up.

The lady spread her legs apart and put her fingers on her exposed, naked pussy. She started rubbing it, playing with it, touching her clit, moving it around. She let out a soft, seductive moan.

God damn! I've surely got a belly-lard tent back in the clinic, Drake thought.

He knew that what he was beholding now was what was called Advanced Multi-Viewpoint Memory Projection, or AMVMP. The Reality Cube stitched together the thoughtstreams and sensestreams from every citizen, along with the live streams from cameras and mics placed at certain intervals everywhere inside the Corporate Zone, as part of the Internet of Things. Inside every living room. Every bedroom. Every bathroom. Every hall. Every street. Every alleyway. Every basement. Every rooftop. Cameras and mics were literally everywhere. They acted like the nervous system of the city. And the brain of the city was the Cloud, a super AI constructed by the Corporate Saviors which constantly monitored all citizens. Through it, the Corporate Saviors saw all, heard all, felt all, and knew all. You couldn't take a shit, take a shower, or yes, whack off, without the Corporate Saviors watching every move.

Thus, utilizing AMVMP, the Reality Cube was able to give Drake what was called "memory preroll." What he was watching now was actually from before the patient's memory. In his line of work, sometimes it was necessary—just like the primitive film or video editors—to have preroll or postroll in order to put everything into context, understand the situation, create the false memory, and then to edit it back into the patient's memory seamlessly, without any gaps. Memory creation was no simple task.

The woman began pumping two fingers into and out of her pussy rapidly. He could see from the fluid dripping down from the vulva that she was very excited. Yes, Reality Fixers were carefully hand-picked individuals, trusted by the Corporate Saviors. They were often required to witness such blatant acts of ungovliness. Even thinking about sex was open rebellion to the citizens' lover, the State. Though they were trusted to witness such scenes, the fixers were also required to erase such scenes afterwards, both from the patient, and from their own memories. Yes, the fixers were able, through the Reality Cube, even to purge their own memories, to wipe out these ungovly scenarios so that they wouldn't linger on them later. It would be so horrible to replay this scene later for myself, Drake thought. Such an act was downright unpermitted of the fixers. Thankfully, Drake had some tricks up his sleeve…

Suddenly, as Drake was lost in his thoughts, from behind some trees, a small girl appeared, no more than four or five years old, wearing lavender pajamas with a pattern of yellow Androgynous Tinker Bells, and holding a white stuffed unisexcorn with a purple horn and hooves. The girl, who looked sleepy, had blonde hair that came down past her shoulders. Ah, now this would be young Kristal. Here is where the badmemory begins.

The girl, rubbing her eyes, was walking towards the bed, towards the ungovly act. Then, suddenly, she stopped in her tracks. She gasped in shock and amazement, dropping the stuffed unisexcorn to the ground. What was her mother doing?

Drake knew that normally they didn't let parents have their children until they turned sixteen, but he had read in the report that Kristal had gotten ill as a child and they had let her go home to her mother for a time. In fact, the possibility of something like this occurring was the very reason the government disallowed the parents from seeing their children during their early, most impressionable years. It was much easier for the government to have complete control over the development of the child at the Govly Academy, supervised by the Govly Makers and surveilled 24/7. This was how they molded each child into the adult that they wanted: a slave in love with their Father-State.

So, this was the badmemory. The unapproved reality to be replaced with a certified, government-approved reality,

courtesy of yours truly, Drake mused. The glorious government had saved man from his primitive, sexual state. Masturbation was a high crime against the State. It was an act of adultery, since all citizens were married to the State. Therefore, the adult Kristal Silverberg could not be allowed to have this memory, which would make her curious about sex. It would take her out of her innocent state and reveal the wide world of sexuality to her. Such was forbidden in modern, saved society.

The girl continued to watch with wide eyes as her mother continued to pleasure herself. Her mother's eyes were closed, and as she continued to moan, she appeared to be totally unaware of her daughter's presence.

This badmemory needed to be sent down the memoryhole. But since the mentists had already put it down there and it had bubbled back up from the unconscious, the Reality Fixer needed to create a new memory, an alternate memory, a strong, fresh, beautiful, vibrant memory which would lure the patient's libido away from this undesirable one and form a new cathexis, leaving that old memory to sink forever to the bottom of the sea of the unconscious.

Reality Fixing was a high art, and throughout time artists have often had to rely on religion in order to fund and make their work possible. Worship of the Corporate Saviors was a religion, Drake knew, although he was one of the few unbelievers. But his love of his work, his craft, was such that it didn't matter to him. He would create something beautiful, spiritual, moving, that would imprint on this patient's mind the holiness of the Corporate Saviors, and the importance of obeying their commandments. Especially the one not to masturbate.

Suddenly, the little girl noticed Drake. She looked him in the eye and said, "Hey, what are you doing here?"

Huh? What am I…? Why had the girl…?

Suddenly, Drake's world was turned upside down. How was this memory talking to him? These weren't people, these were memories. Obviously, he hadn't been there years ago when this happened. How then could this girl see him? "Wh– wha– what are you–I'm not here!"

I must be going crazy, he thought. Probably he had imagined it.

But the girl went on.

"Of course you are! Don't be silly!"

The girl continued looking straight into his eyes. She was really talking to him!

"I'm not being silly. You're a memory. You can't see me." Why was he sitting here having a conversation with the scene he needed to fix?

"Come on, silly. I know where you are. You're in here!" The girl tapped one finger on the side of her head, as if pointing at her brain.

Her brain... I'm in...

Then it started.

Drake's consciousness started cycling through the three of them...the girl, the mother, and himself. Oh, god, this can't be happening! Image after image flipped through his brain in rapid succession. He couldn't stay put in his own point of view. His perceptions were breaking down. He was losing touch with the world around him. Even if it was only the simulated world of his patient's mind. The images kept getting faster and faster. It was too much. His brain felt like it would explode.

Cycling and cycling, a million miles an hour... Ahh!!!!! God! Stop it!

And then, suddenly, the cycling ceased.

Only one point of view.

Thank god! Everything was back to normal. Wait...

He looked down and noticed he was wearing lavender pajamas with Androgynous Tinker Bells. At his feet, a white stuffed unisexcorn lay in the humus and dried leaves of the ground of the Forest of Memories.

The mother, still naked on the bed, had stopped servicing her pussy. She sat up. She picked up a pack of cigarettes and lighter from a small nightstand. She took out a cigarette, lit it, and took a drag. She looked at Drake. "Want one?"

Drake was now inside the little girl's body. Kristal Silverberg's body, from this memory. "No thanks," he answered. Well at least when he spoke, it still sounded like his voice. He looked around. His own skinny body was standing nearby. It looked like it had been...switched off. It was breathing, staring into the distance, as if in standby mode.

"So, now you know my mom's little secret," the buck naked

sitting woman with two beautiful bazookas said. “And the reason why I’m back here in this god-damned mental clinic. But you’re gonna fix it, right?” She took another drag off the cigarette. “I mean, I don’t want to be lobotomized.”

Drake knew what that cycling of perceptions was. Random strange phenomena occurring while one was connected to another mind had a name. Percept Glitches. PGs such as these had been known to occur with more frequency in the early, experimental days of MindLink. Of course, nowadays, MindLink was commonplace, and included in almost all technological devices, including the smartphones citizens wore at all times. Nowadays, PGs were more common among amateur Brain Melders, the software for Brain Meld being very error-prone and unstable. But the Reality Fixer’s hardware, the Reality Cube, and the software it ran were designed to be invulnerable to PGs such as this. Drake was no amateur teenage Brain Melding geek tinkering with homebrew experimental software. He was a pro, with top-of-the-line gear. Even the mentists were small fries compared to him. There were only a few Reality Fixers per city. Fixing reality was a holy calling, and the Corporate Saviors equipped them with state-of-the-art, reliable technology. And percept glitches such as this had never happened to Drake while using the Reality Cube.

Even more troubling than the fact that a PG could occur while using the Reality Cube was the fact that repeated exposure to such mental glitches was known to cause Percept Glitch Syndrome (or PGS), a rare but extremely serious disorder which could disturb one’s perception even of real reality, while not plugged in. Such sorry souls as ended up with PGS were never safe from such attacks—even their brain’s incoming biological sensestreams could at any moment break down into garbled nonsense.

But how had the patient even been able to break through into his mind at all? For all intents and purposes, that should have been impossible. She had been sedated. How had she broken out of the Distraction Simulation? And even if she had, there were other safeguards in place to make sure the patient couldn’t sense the fixer’s presence. The Reality Cube was a stealth mentation device. While connected to the Cube, a fixer’s mind was connected to the patient’s mind, yes. That

much was true. But through the Cube's advanced defensive and cloaking systems, Reality Fixers were completely invisible to the patient. In theory, it was impossible for patients to even perceive the presence of someone connected to their brain when connected to a fixer, who, unlike mentists, did all their work behind the scenes. Officially, Reality Fixers didn't exist. The public knew only about the mentists, about the cleaning away of ungovly plaque from their minds. But the fact that the government was creating and implanting false memories into people's minds was top secret. And yet, here this patient was, having broken through, not only perceiving his presence, but also communicating with him. Who was this woman? Were her mental powers really that strong that she could not only sense a Reality Fixer, but even invade his personal workspace inside her mind?

Through the little girl's mouth, Drake spoke, "Of course I'm going to fix it. That's what I came to do. But first, tell me how you got here."

"What do you mean, how I got here? It's my mind. Tell me why ***you're*** here." The big-titted woman kept smoking.

"It's like you said, I'm going to fix your problem. But in order to—awww shit!"

The cycling had started back up. It was as if his connection to this reality were a slot machine, and someone had just pulled the lever, his vision randomly coursing through the three figures. It stopped again.

He looked down. This time he saw two gigantic, naked tits. Holy shit! Take a look at those bazookas! Succulent, soft…with two perky nipples standing up on the end of them. He would have been tempted to cop a feel, jiggle those juicy jugs around, if he hadn't been so freaked out by his cycling consciousness… and if the patient weren't watching him.

He looked down at the girl. She was now in standby mode, breathing, looking ahead, not doing anything. Just then, his own skinny body, standing a few yards off, behind the little girl, began walking towards the bed. His body, as it approached, spoke up, but with a woman's voice. He realized that the mom had also spoken with the same voice, but he had been too shocked and confused earlier to realize it. He recognized that voice. It was…Kristal Silverberg's voice, from the nightly Reality Mediation Broadcast on cerebralvision.

"Well, whatever you're doing, it isn't working. You haven't fixed my problem yet, and we're still here. Are you sure your equipment is up-to-date? Maybe you need to do a virus scan." She—in his body—walked up to the nightstand, took out another cigarette, and lit it. She motioned for him to give her space to sit down.

What in the world was going on here? Drake, stunned, made some room for his body, which sat down next to him. He looked down again at the big bazookas this body which he was currently inhabiting sported. Normally, he'd be tempted to spend more time looking down there, and maybe exploring, but he quickly raised his eyes back up to look at himself. Best to avoid this woman getting the wrong impression of me, gawking at her mother's tits, and then reporting it to the GG, he thought.

So now he was sitting in bed with himself. He, in a sexy, buxom naked lady body holding a cigarette, and next to him, his own body, smoking a cigarette. But I don't smoke, he thought, and threw the cigarette down on the ground.

"I am sure there is nothing wrong with my equipment. We do checks regularly to make sure everything is in order." He wanted to say more, but caught himself. Best not say too much. Any and all information regarding Reality Fixing was classified.

"That's what the last Reality Fixer said."

What? She knew about Reality Fixers?

"The last…huh?"

"Don't play dumb, I know who you guys are. And I don't care. I'm not going to tell anybody. I just want this freaking memory gone so I can get back to normal life and stop having to come to the mental clinic all the time." His body continued to smoke the cigarette.

Fuck. In all his years of Reality Fixing, something like this had never occurred. There was definitely something with this lady.

His body continued talking in Kristal Silverberg's voice. "Don't worry, I'm not going to tell anybody about you guys. But, like I said, are you gonna be able to fix it?"

"So what happened last time…I mean…with the last…Reality Fixer?" He realized now that Dr. Richards' report had

mentioned none of this.

"Well first, I broke through, just like now, and I was talking with him. And then he said he was gonna fix it. And then he did whatever he did, and I went home. But then, a day or two later, the memory reappeared again." His body kept smoking.

On a tree branch overhanging the bed, a gray squirrel with a large bushy tail, beige face, and inquisitive, beady eyes appeared. It ran down the gently sloping branch to the end and looked around at the bed, and then at them, as if curious.

"How many times has this happened?"

"I'd say about seven times."

"Seven times? You mean you've tried seven different Reality Fixers?" There weren't even that many Reality Fixers in the Seatt-Tacoma Corporate Zone.

"Yeah. I'm from Corporate Zone Diego-Angeles. The first five or six times were there. Then they told me I should move up here. Said the air is fresher. Might help me. Plus I can try new Reality Fixers. By the way, the air isn't fresher. And the constant acid rain here sucks."

The squirrel jumped into the bed with them.

Suddenly, Drake's gigantic boobs, err, rather, the boobs of Kristal's mother's body which he was inhabiting, detached themselves from their body and ran off on their own and started barking at the squirrel. The nipples had creases, and the creases were barking as if they were mouths. They approached the squirrel aggressively.

The squirrel, intimidated by the barking boobs, ran off.

What the fuck? Why were those boobs—?

"Here, let me help you," his own body said, with Kristal's voice. His body then leaned over and scooped up the boobs and returned them to Drake's chest. They reattached themselves. Oh, fuck, this was confusing.

What was happening? Another percept glitch?

Suddenly the squirrel reappeared on the bed.

"Shoo!" Drake said, clutching his chest protectively, not wanting to lose his boobs again. This was the first time he had ever had boobs. And they were amazing, to boot. "Get out of here! We were having a serious conversation." He looked down and realized he was holding two big, luscious, gorgeous boobs. Oh fuck. His boner was reaching its zenith.

The squirrel stood anxiously between the two of them, looking back and forth, as if to determine who it could trust more. Suddenly, while hand bra-ing his tits with one hand to keep them in place, Drake made a lunge with his other manicured hand for the squirrel, intent on throwing it out of the bed.

"Don't do that! I like him," Drake's body's hand grabbed the big boob body's hand, stopping Drake from grabbing the squirrel. But Drake's body's hand didn't let go. It just sat there, holding the big boob body's hand. Drake's body had made a move on Kristal's mothers body, holding her hand. Was she flirting with him? They were now sitting in bed, holding hands. Only, she was him, and he was a naked lady…

The squirrel apparently had made its decision. It leaped up onto Drake's skinny body's leg.

"Oh! How cute!" Kristal, in Drake's body, let the squirrel run up her lap. She picked it up and started petting it.

Suddenly, despite his initial alarm, and the confusion in his brain resulting from this bizarre turn of events, an entirely different thought struck him. She must have a very unique psychological makeup to be able to do what she does. He suddenly became more curious about this patient. This ability of hers to detect and enter the Reality Fixers' normally hidden world intrigued him. This system which he was a part of was a system he wanted to destroy. And if such things as this, a clear failure of the system, existed, perhaps there was more about the Corporate Saviors' system to be discovered. Discovered… and exploited. Perhaps these powers of hers could be harnessed, utilized, directed. Directed at destroying the very system he had vowed to his father he would destroy. Perhaps this was the opportunity he was looking for.

"Tell you what. I'll fix your problem. But I want you to make a deal with me. I don't want you to go to another Reality Fixer. I take pride in my work and I want to see the job through. So we're going to meet up in a few days, and I'll check and make sure the problem didn't start up again. I'll follow up with you and we'll monitor it, and make sure the situation is resolved. Of course, I'm not allowed to do that—everything is supposed to go through the mentists and people aren't supposed to know about us fixers. And if you go back to the mentist with the problem, they could call a different fixer. So we'll have to meet

in real reality, and it will have to be a secret. Deal?"

He was taking a big risk trusting in this woman. But she also represented an opportunity. And to seize any opportunity, it was always necessary to take some risk.

She, through his body, looked straight into his eyes. "If you promise to fix my problem, then we have a deal!" She squeezed his hand. Errh, rather, her mother's hand, with his hand. She seemed excited that someone would take such an interest in her and her problem.

Drake smiled and nodded at her. "Okay, now first of all…oh, fuck! Not again!"

It had started once more. The cycling. The slot machine of perceptions kept spinning and spinning…he was looking at himself through the mother, and then the mother through himself, and then the mother and himself on the bed through the little girl. Then suddenly…

He was himself again, not the mother. Thank god! He sat in the bed holding the naked woman's hand, looking into her eyes. "Okay, let's try that again. Yes, I promise to fix your problem if you do all the things I said. So do we have a deal?"

But…there was something wrong. The mother's eyes…they seemed cold, lifeless, staring ahead. Her mother's body was now in standby mode.

Where had she gone? He looked down at the little girl. But the little girl was also staring straight ahead, breathing. Also in standby mode.

Where was the patient? Had he lost her? Or had she left him intentionally? Perhaps she had gotten what she wanted. She had exposed him, exposed that he was willing to do something forbidden, to break the rules, to rebel against his Glorious Government. Was this woman a spy? Perhaps she was working for the Corporate Saviors, and he had been caught. And now he would be punished…Shit! He, more than anybody, knew that in a totalitarian society, nobody could be trusted—everyone had to be treated as a potential spy. That was how they had caught his father. In those early days of mind reading, the government's thought-sifting algorithms hadn't been as good as they are now. They had been searching for a needle in a haystack of information. Not like today's Cloud, capable of carefully dissecting every thought on the planet. But one of

the people he had been talking about his lofty dreams to had narced on him to the government. Damn! Why had Drake given in to this woman so easily?

"Deal!" said a tiny, squeaky voice. He looked down at his lap. It was the squirrel. It was looking up at him with its large, beady, intelligent eyes. Then it said, "So let's get started?"

Drake breathed a sigh of relief. Thank goodness. She hadn't double crossed him after all. But she was now a squirrel.

The squirrel continued in its squeaky voice, "But, I noticed you took a liking to her body." The squirrel nodded towards the large-breasted mother's nude form. "I mean, you couldn't keep your eyes away from those tits!" The squirrel broke up laughing. "You wanna be her while you do your work?"

DIARY OF THE UNSAVED: SHRINKING

Amidst the moss-covered stones and fallen logs on the forest floor there lay what appeared to be some sort of natural rock formation with a big gaping whole in it. Actually, it was the opening of a lava tube, formed centuries or millennia before by a nearby volcanic eruption.

Presently, in the mouth of the lava tube there appeared a young man, his forehead and body drenched in sweat. He was dressed in an old-fashioned, homemade shirt and pants. The young man was now considerably leaner. His body was going through the process of becoming Unsaved.

He had just hiked through the dark belly of the lava tube, a long dark cave under the forest floor. Later, in his hut, he wrote about the experience in his diary:

My body keeps shrinking. The more it shrinks, the better I look. I become more like the Unsaved every day.

I've been doing quite a bit of exercise and losing a lot of weight. I've lost more than one hundred pounds so far. Even with only growing my own natural food and eating it, instead of sitting on my fat ass and eating chemically-enriched corporate food, I would already be losing a huge amount of weight. But since I have a lot of free time and all this amazing nature all around me, and people with tons of skills they are happy to share, I've taken up several hobbies, including hiking, spelunking, archery, camping, bushcraft, and shooting.

I've also been out hunting several times with the men. We hardly ever use firearms for hunting, preferring the much less noisy method: bows and arrows. In fact, one of the men has even been showing me how to hunt with a bolas.

Though the Unsaved prefer to hunt with other weapons, they all learn to use firearms for self defense. Thus, I went to the shooting range and learned the basics of using a gun.

I've hiked all around these woods. I've climbed mountain peaks from which one is lavished with

stunning vistas of the vast forest and the grand, lofty mountains in the distance. I've explored caves and ancient lava tubes. I've swum in dazzlingly clear lakes, canoed down scenic rivers, and dived from the top of spectacularly gorgeous waterfalls.

I'm much happier in nature than I ever was in virtual reality or the Corporate Zone. I'm a totally new person. I'm glowing with health, looking and feeling better every day. The healthier my body becomes, the sharper my mind feels. I'm thinking more clearly, and feeling better than I ever have in my life.

So that raises the question…why would anybody fall for the Corporate Zone's trap in the first place? Why would someone spend time in the unreal, the artificial, which causes their body and mind to stagnate, bloat, and self-destruct, when they can spend time in the real, where their mind constantly improves, their body constantly gets more powerful, elegant, and full of life, the way it was designed to be?

And what's more, *anybody* can do it. If I can get in shape, anybody can.

CHAPTER 5: HOW TO CREATE A FALSE MEMORY

The naked, voluptuous redhaired woman sat on the invisible chair in the center of the Reality Matrix. The eyes of the grey squirrel perched on her shoulder shone like two large beads, taking everything in. Drake's consciousness was in Kristal's mother, and Kristal's consciousness was in the squirrel, watching as her mother's springy, jello-ey, humongous tits bounced around in a lively manner as Drake used the delicate, manicured hands with red nail polish to scroll, flick, and zoom through thousands of images—people, places, objects, and memories—showing the squirrel how it was all done, explaining the intricacies of false memory creation. The squirrel watched on with eager interest.

This patient was so strange, and knew way too much, but somehow, paradoxically, he felt oddly at ease with her. He felt more at ease with her hiding nothing, speaking openly, than he did with the rest of society, pretending, faking, putting on a show. Most of his daily life was a lie. Speaking things he did not believe, doing things he didn't agree with. All so he could survive in this totalitarian society. But her openness, her frankness was somehow contagious, and he spoke frankly with her. Of course, not about his hatred of the GG, but about his work. He wasn't able to talk about the technical details of his work with anybody. Fixers were so secretive and reclusive, they didn't even know each other. The government wanted it that way, presumably so they could use fixers on each other, if necessary. So most fixers didn't even have the opportunity to talk with other fixers about their job. But here she was, sitting with him in his very own Reality Matrix, and he was baring all.

She looked cute as a squirrel, perched on his shoulder, almost like a pet. She was wide-eyed and alert. She looked intelligent. This lady was rather…unique. To say the least. She had guessed he liked her mother's naked body, and far from being outraged like any normal person would be, she had thought it cute and allowed him to take on her form. He had even played around a bit with her jiggly wiggly titties, and she had laughed.

This lady, Kristal Silverberg, was different than any other person he had ever met in two ways. First, she was open, carefree, and shameless. The exact opposite of most people in society, who were always acting offended or holier-than-thou, or competing to see who could lick the boots of the Corporate

Saviors the most. And second, she appeared to have mental abilities that no other person on earth had, to his knowledge. She could even break through the Reality Cube's defenses and reach the Reality Fixers, the government's mind ninjas who went behind the scenes and implanted false memories. She had spoken with more Reality Fixers than Drake had.

"It's so interesting being able to sit here and scroll through all my memories like this. My entire life…in the palm of your hands! I wish I could do that. I want my own Reality Matrix," the squirrel said, in Kristal Silverberg's voice. At least now she was using her own voice, and not that silly squirrel voice.

Drake, in the mother's body, just smiled. "Are you ready to see me work my magic?"

"Oh, yes! Please do. I've been waiting such a long time for this. You are the first Reality Fixer to let me in here. The others just left me waiting in the Forest of Memories while they did their work."

"By the way, that squirrel…a friend of yours?"

"Oh, yes," said the squirrel. "This squirrel lived in a tree near my apartment when I was a young girl. He was my little friend back then. And I guess he still is my friend, in a way. Only in my memories, of course. I'm sure the real one must be dead by now."

"Well, we'll dedicate this memory to your poor little dead friend."

Drake had gathered up the raw assets. The mother. A set of grey pajamas for her, covered with corporate logos. The mother's bedroom, along with all its furniture. And the stuffed unisexcorn, of course. And all the other necessaries. He had also prepared a Reality Fixer's secret weapons: subconscious assets. Imperceptible ambient music. Mood enhancers. Subliminal messages, to effectively reprogram the patient's subconscious to love their Saviors. Stuff such as "Your Government loves you," "Corporations are essentially altruistic, benevolent entities seeking the good of humanity," and the like. This would be a holy occasion. A spiritual outpouring. A striking memory dedicated to our beloved Saviors.

Of course, he could just implant the subliminal stuff by itself. But then the offending memory would still be there. Thus, it was necessary to employ a combination of strategies

all at once, to exorcise the ungovly thought straight out of her mind.

After collecting all necessary assets, Drake had, with one extraordinary flick of both manicured hands, whisked away all the many rows of images, leaving only one row—the row containing his collected assets. Drake and Kristal were now sitting in black space, with only one row of images. He then purposefully lifted the manicured hands up, and the row of images floated up in response. He repositioned the row of assets at the very top of their field of vision.

Drake then, with a flick of a graceful hand, scrolled through the assets. He started with the mother's bedroom. Spreading out the delicate hands, he enlarged it. The image of the room kept growing and growing... Presently it engulfed them. They were no longer in the black void of the Reality Matrix, but sitting off in the corner of Kristal's mother's bedroom. But at the top of their field of vision, there was still the one scrollable bar of images—the assets.

Drake reached out and plucked the mother (using a plucking motion of the hand) from the row of assets above and plopped her down onto the bed as if she were a doll. Her eyes and body were lifeless, staring ahead. She looked like a real, living, naked doll. Next, he flicked through the assets and selected the underwear and then the pajamas, using them to clothe the naked big-titted doll. Drake then started, by slight twists of the hands and fingers, to manipulate the mother's body like a marionette on a string.

He was now the puppet master.

And Kristal's mother, his puppet.

Drake tried to imagine how bizarre this scene must be to Kristal. She was perched on her mother's shoulder, and her mother was naked, and her naked mother was manipulating another copy of her mother, which was lifeless, moving it around and putting clothes on it, as if it were a hyperrealistic blow-up doll.

"I chose to have her on the bed to give you a low angle view of her, to make the scene more imposing, more memorable," Drake explained. The naked lady's arms and hands twisted and turned, setting the doll-mom up in a kneeling position, smack in the middle of the bed. He tilted the head to look upward, as

if she could see through the ceiling into the sky. He lifted the arms, so they were also stretched heavenward, supplicating. Drake's movements showed that he was a perfectionist. An artist. A Rembrandt or Michelangelo of the mind. His attention was flawless, the movement of the doll-mother's arms and hands perfect. Now and then, Drake had to reposition a leg, or foot, or an individual finger, or the tilt of her head, or adjust the expression of the eyes, to make the whole composition more symmetrical, holistic. This was going to be the perfect memory.

"How long have you been doing this?" the squirrel asked.

"Well, my uncle helped me get this position soon after I graduated from Govly Academy. I've been doing it for about twenty years now, give or take."

"Wow, you're amazing!" The squirrel said.

Drake was now scrubbing back and forth in time, adjusting a corner of the mother's mouth here, an outstretched arm there, as the living doll's movements went backwards and forwards through time. He was fine-tuning. The doll-mother on the bed truly looked to be in the ecstasies of a religious experience. Drake then grabbed a voice module from his assets and plopped it into the doll-mom.

The doll-mother's head suddenly turned and looked Drake in the eye. "I love you, Drake," she said.

The squirrel gasped.

"Relax." Drake smiled. "I needed to test the voice module. I thought that would get your attention." Drake had even told this patient his name, so comfortable did he feel around her.

"No, but I mean…" the squirrel said, searching for the words. "That's really my mother! That's her voice, exactly! It seems so… ***real***. So I guess you can make my mom do whatever you want. I mean, in my memories…"

"That's right," Drake replied. "In your memories, I am king. I can make you remember whatever I want, and that will be your new reality. Your memory of what happened in the past controls how you view the present…controls, completely changes, the actions you take every day. If you remember that someone killed one of your loved ones, you'll go to the ends of the earth to destroy that person. But remember that same person saving your loved one's life, and you'll spend the rest of

your life trying to please them. Two completely divergent paths, two different lives, based simply on changing one memory." Drake had said it as a hypothetical, but, it being too close to reality, he decided not to continue down that line of thought.

Utilizing Artificial Intelligence, the Reality Cube sampled and reconstructed the voices and created completely realistic 3D models of anyone from the patient's memories. Hence, Drake could have anyone from the patient's memories say or do anything he wanted. And if it was done skillfully enough, and the patient's mind cathected enough libidinal energy into the new memory, it would keep the repressed memory down.

Drake sat there telling it what to say, the doll-mom repeating each word. Now and then, he went back and changed a few words or lines here and there. In this manner, he built up a speech which lasted about thirty minutes. So far they had been at it for a few hours.

"Wow, I never knew memory creation was such hard work!" the squirrel said.

"Most people don't realize how time-consuming memory creation is. It takes much longer to create a memory than the actual memory itself. Plus, we always add pre-memory and post-memory to make sure everything fits. Just in case, for example, after the little girl version of you went back to bed and fell asleep her subconscious was still listening. Everything has to mesh perfectly and be congruent with other memories, or else the psyche rejects it. The gestalt method of memory-making."

"Amazing! I never knew how complicated Reality Fixing really was! But it makes sense. The psyche is a complicated thing."

"But the awesome thing is that the Reality Cube, being connected to the fixer's brain, extends and speeds up his thought processes, lending some of its processing power as an extension of the fixer's own mind. So depending on how in sync the fixer is with his Cube, every hour spent in the Cube sometimes only takes about five to ten minutes in the real world. If it weren't for that, some fixing jobs could literally take days—and it really does feel like days for us, even if it only takes a few hours in the real world. It all depends on how complicated they are. MRMBs are especially brutal."

"MRMBs?"

"Yeah. Multiple Repressed Memory Breakages. You see, all our memories are connected. So sometimes when one repressed memory breaks through, it can also bring other repressed memories along with it."

Drake was now adding subliminal visual effects. He dabbed a few subconscious sun sparkles here and there, so they were shimmering in the air around the doll-mother. He plucked an invisible, generic light source from his scrollable row of subliminal assets and positioned it, aiming it down on Kristal's mother's face. Then he adjusted its brightness and hue, so it was perfect. Subliminal effects were a fixer's stock-in-trade, and allowed him to make even a religious, corporate experience such as this feel completely realistic and immersive.

Finally. All the vocals had been set, and the effects in place. The lighting was perfect, and all the subconscious messages had been surreptitiously slipped in. He had adjusted the mom's makeup and skin tone, adjusted her pajamas in just the way he wanted them, added soft, imperceptible religious music in the background, and added just the right unconscious mood enhancers.

The false memory was ready to be implanted.

"Shall we watch it?" Drake asked the squirrel.

"Hells, yeah!" The squirrel answered.

The theater dimmed, metaphorically.

Drake snapped the manicured fingers, and the production began rolling.

Kristal's mother.

Kneeling in bed.

Wearing grey pajamas plastered with corporate logos like Tarky Tarla and TinyLimp.

There is a painting on the wall above her bed that Drake placed there, in the style of that Mormon painting of Jesus floating in the clouds surrounded by all his holy angels—except that Ron Wolfe is Jesus and all the other Corporate Saviors are his angels. He is looking all manly and heavenly in his chest-revealing toga, his lips slightly parted.

In one hand, she clutches a data rosary—a chain of ones and zeros—which Drake had placed there.

She lifts the other hand heavenward.

Her eyes full of emotion, full of love and devotion.

Just then, the little girl version of Kristal walks into the room, wearing her lavender pajamas and holding the stuffed unisexcorn. Her mother doesn't notice her. She listens as her mother begins to pray.

"Dear Corporate Saviors, thou who knowest all the thoughts and intents of my heart, nothing can be hidden from thee, o Saviors—please search my soul and see that I love thee with every axon and dendrite of my central nervous system which is connected to thy holy smartphone which feedest thee data about me second by second, minute by minute, hour by hour. I hidest nothing from thee…

"O blessed Saviors, I thank thee for thine holy Corporate Media, and for the blessed Reality Mediators who tell me what reality is, so I don't have to think, or use the scientific method, or try to figure out the world around me for myself, and so that I fall not into the wicked ways of Conspiracy Theory, and have not opinions different from the majority of people, from what the Government tells us to think, because I know that thy holy book proclaims that Sanity is Statistical, so whatever the majority of people think, that is reality.

"Oh blessed Corporate Saviors! I thank thee for thy holy Manna which thou sendest me from thy holy autofactories, and for plumpening my plump body into healthy plumpness."

The doll-mother's body is primitive, beautiful, and big-chested. But only here in this mental world. In the memory of real life, it would be her gigantic corporate-saved body. All citizens had nanotech reinforced beds, so they wouldn't break if the citizens decided to kneel on top of them and pray to their loving Corporate Saviors. Nanotechnology had made materials hundreds of times stronger, easily able to support the weight of modern, corporate-saved man.

"I thank our Glorious Government for depositing admincredits into my account each month so that I can survive, and I thank thee that I don't have to work, and that I can just be a lazy ass all day and mess around in thy holy sims. I thank thee, Corporate Saviors, for doing everything for me so I don't have to do anything for myself.

"Oh Apex Data Predators, highest on the Holy Data Chain,

thou who feedest on my data like a pack of hyenas feed on a carcass…I know that thou feedest upon my data for my own benefit. I lay all my data bare before thee! Surveil me, o Saviors, analyze my data! Predict my behavior with thine holy algorithms!

"I thank thee, o Saviors, for granting me permission to use one of thy infinite asexual identities which thou providest that I might be free from the inappropriate chains of sex. Deliver me from the inappropriate, misogynistic, insane Conspiracy Theorists and their pernicious ways. I thank thee for letting me do what thou tellest me to do. I want only to do thy will—the will of the Corporations—upon the earth. Please, o Saviors, fill my soul full of buzzwords and corporate ideology. I thank thee for letting me be thy puppet, and to pretend like I'm a unique individual for doing so. I thank thee for delivering me from the curse of freedom, and deciding for me what to do with my life. I support the Current Thing. I support anything and everything the Corporations and the Government do, because among them, conspiracy is impossible, and everything they do is for our benefit and salvation. Thine is the glory, and the govliness, and the corporateness…in the name of the Administration, and the Corporations, and the Media, Amen."

Suddenly, a pillar of light shines down from above, bathing her in radiance. The mother's beautiful features, all ablaze in the holy light, gaze directly into it. Sparkles from heaven flit down all around her like butterflies and her entire body glows as if caught up in a holy ecstasy. A voice booms down from above.

"Oh Thandy Silverberg, blessed are ye, for thou hast faith in the religion of Government. Thou believest that the deity of Government exists. And for this, we will not painlessly end thee, or put thee in a cage, or call thee an evil, dangerous Conspiracy Theorist and endeavor to set the public against thee with our holy indoctrination. Thou knowest that the three parts of the Governmenthead: the Administration, the Corporations, and the Media are One, and act with one heart and one mind, always and only for the benefit of the people. And thou knowest that all which the Government and Corporations sayeth through the holy Media Industrial Complex constitute Reality, and that to question them is insanity. Because of thy faith in Corporations and Government,

I shall reward thee with even more holy indoctrination from on high."

"Oh Corporate Saviors, please do! Please rain down upon me thy graces, if thou seest fit! I know that we citizens are helpless without thee and need thy holy word."

"Then I shall grant thee this holy bit of indoctrination. Remember, Thandy, my child, that for a man to be manly and want to have sex with women is inappropriate. And for a woman to want to have sex with those manly men who want to have sex is also inappropriate. And for a man to want to have sex with a woman who wants to have sex with…ah, never mind. The important thing to remember is this: the only thing that is good and appropriate and govly and progressive and doesn't offend or oppress other people in anyway is choosing from the infinite asexual identities which thy holy Corporate Saviors allow you, in their grace, to choose from. And thinking about strong, manly men who want to bang you, while thou playest with thine pussy is wicked and uncorporatelike. So never do that. Remember the first and greatest of commandments: Thou shalt not masturbate.

"Remember that without the Corporations and the Government, thou wouldn'st be able to choose from infinite identities. Thou would only have one option in life, to be a wicked, inappropriate, heterosexual woman. But in our mercy, we allow thee to choose from infinite asexualnouns. Thou art not free to take initiative and decide what to do with thine own life. Thou art only free to do what we Corporations tell thee thou canst do with thy life, and only free to have the identity we tell thee thou canst have, through our holy marketing campaigns for products like bath soap and ass wiping paper and sugarwater, which have nothing to do with the products we sell, but are only about us taking it upon ourselves to tell you how you should live your life.

"By yourself, you could do nothing, you could only be a slave to your heteronormative biological instincts. But we have freed thee. And thou art a slave no longer. Except to us. And that's a good thing. Because being a slave to us is good. Being a slave to us means being free. Freedom is slavery. But slavery to us, and not to thine biological imperatives. Don't do what your biology tells you to do. Do what we tell you to do. Because your own instincts are evil. And we are good.

“Now, go, and take thine chemical castration meds, and give puberty blockers to your daughter, and continue worshipping the Corporations and the Government and listening to every word they give you about how they make you free and allow you to choose from infinite identities.”

The little girl version of Kristal stands there, watching all this with wide eyes, mouth agape. Then she quickly and quietly turns around and walks out of the room before her mother can notice her.

Playback stopped.

There was silence for a moment. And then...

“You’re a genius!” the squirrel squeaked with joy. And then the squirrel kissed her naked mom on the lips.

INVENTOR'S THOUGHTSTREAM: NEURO DAYDREAM DISORDER

The inventor sat there at his workbench, tinkering with a strange, small metallic device with various knobs and different colored wires on its surface, worrying about recent events.

The dreams.

He had been having them regularly.

At one moment, he would be in reality, and the next moment, he'd be off in some fantasy or nightmare, in a bizarre and twisted dream.

On the one hand, he drifted into them from a normal waking state—like with daydreams. But, on the other hand, the content of the dreams themselves were much more like the random, senseless, absurd dreams one has at night. And, more importantly, unlike daydreams, during which one had some inkling of reality, of the outer world around them, and could "snap out of it" when necessary, during these episodes he lost all contact with the outside world. He couldn't snap out of it.

Convinced that this condition was somehow caused by his prototype MindLink device which was installed at the base of his skull, he decided to call what he was experiencing "Neuro Daydream Disorder," or NDD.

At first, it had happened once or twice a day. But the number of episodes increased over time. Now it was happening almost every hour. He'd lose all connection with the outside world for five or six minutes while it was happening. He needed to find a cure, and he needed to find it quick, before NDD took over his entire life.

He and his new boss, the Corporate Savior, were on slightly better terms now. In fact, the Savior had even promised him that they would allow him to continue working on applications for curing neurological disorders, in addition to the smartphone project. Eventually, he had had to explain to the Savior what was happening with his dreams. After explaining the strange side effect, however, he had assured him that he would be able to quickly cure the disorder. He lied and said he already thought he knew what was causing it and it should be resolved in the next month or so.

The strange thing was that nothing of this sort had been

present, to his knowledge, in any of the human or animal tests.

Suddenly he was gripping the handle bars of the bicycle he had had as a child, looking out over a red rock canyon. He could see the amber sun setting on the other side of the deep, almost bottomless chasm. He edged his bike forward, looking down. Oh god, that was a deep drop. What was he doing? His feet started to pedal. He was slowly moving forward, forward...

All at once, his front wheel dipped down and he was coasting, dropping, falling...

God damn it! He was riding his bike down the cliff face, hitting boulders here and there. The ride was bouncy. He was careening off protrusion after protrusion. His bicycle began flipping end over end. He was flipping, bouncing... Down, down, down, he went. Then he lost hold of his bicycle and it went bouncing off on its own. Now his body was bouncing, flipping, cartwheeling down the canyon, smashing into boulder after boulder. But he was elastic. It didn't hurt him. It was actually fun, in a strange way. He kept flipping and bouncing. Now the Corporate Savior who was his boss was there beside him, flipping and falling, a big grin on his face. He was enjoying it. Bounce, flip, fall. Bounce, flip, fall. Whee! There was no end, no bottom, to this chasm...

And then, bam! He was back in his lab, fiddling with the small metallic device. Damn it! Another one... He couldn't go on this way. His very contact with reality was being pulled out from underneath him.

And that was exactly why he was working on this device. This humble little contraption would do the trick.

He hoped.

Since the research company he worked for had been bought by WhirlySnake, he had also done a fair bit of studying up on the corporation. Well, "studying" would be putting it lightly. Most "students" didn't use the methods he had access to.

On the one hand, the inventor was completely loyal to the Glorious Government. On the other hand, as a lifelong hacker, he didn't fret about taking certain liberties to acquire information that wasn't readily available to the public. Actually, what he was doing would be considered illegal hacking of government databases that would be punishable by being

painlessly ended. Would be. But they'd never find him out. He was good at what he did. And those who are good at what they do deserve a little more leeway, he reasoned. He wasn't just a normal member of the public, after all. He was the inventor of a technology that would change life as we know it.

Thus, he had done his own investigation.

And in the process had found some slightly troubling emails between Corporate Saviors which seemed to imply that building MindLink into the smartphone was simply a clever and effective marketing ploy. One of the Saviors' messages had gone something like this: since all people already have smartphones and can't live without them, all you have to do is use smartphones as a trojan horse to get everyone to install MindLink inside their body. If people want to be able to continue to function in society—which they are now powerless to do without smartphones, having become fully dependent on them—then, they will have to get this upgraded smartphone model installed internally, inside their body, since the external-only models of smartphones have already been discontinued. And eventually, to use the latest apps, everyone will be forced to upgrade their hardware, which now means getting this new smartphone installed inside their body. See how this works? Want to call a taxi? Now you need a chip inside your body. Want to spend money? Now you need a chip in your body. Want to carry your ID in case you are pulled over by a cop? Now you need a chip in your body. Come on, its just a smartphone! You need a smartphone to survive, and all the old smartphones, that you held in your hand, outside your body, have been discontinued. They are out of date. You have no choice.

Actually, their plan was to take his internal device and couple it with an external one that monitors the citizens' surroundings with constant audiovisual feeds from multi-directional cameras and mics which cannot be turned off—which wouldn't be possible with the internal device alone—as well as a surface display and speakers that could be used to display mandatory government announcements, and do things like flash solid red and emit a loud buzzing sound to alert people when a citizen was thinking about doing something illegal, and things of that nature. They would get people to accept this Orwell-on-steroids device by playing up the

convenience of being able to have “eyes in the back of your head,” as well as in the side etc. They called this new highly convenient—and of course required to survive in modern society—system the XI (Xternal/Internal) Smartphone.

Such things were to be found among the content of the emails. But that was just the tip of the iceberg. More troubling than that were messages he had found of an even more sinister nature, about how the aim of the original smartphone, all those decades ago, was to be a device to digitally subjugate the masses. And they seemed to think that now that they had MindLink, the possibilities for achieving this aim had grown exponentially. The future of the smartphone…was the future subjugation of mankind. And his MindLink made it possible. What had his invention gotten him into? This hadn’t been the kind of thing he had been thinking about at all when he had invented the world’s first digital cerebral interface.

He shook his head, trying to ward away the thoughts. Now he was getting into Conspiracy Theory territory. He knew that a good, sane citizen thinks everything the government and corporations do is good.

His attitude towards the government and corporations up until that time had always been the one that most scientists and inventors have. We need them. It was simple. They pay our paychecks. Don’t bite the hand that feeds you.

The inventor sighed. Maybe he had gone too far with his prying. He had to remind himself that even if these corporate types sometimes seemed shady and to have an agenda, they were rendering a valuable service to society. Society needed visionary types, leaders who could guide people and technology in the right direction. His job was to create. He had to trust them to do the things he couldn’t do—organize, manage, control. Communicate effectively with the public. The inventor was a recluse, with very little knowledge about public relations. What he loved to do was tinker, to experiment, to figure out how things work, to break them into their various components, and then rearrange them and create something new. He needed to focus on what he was good at. Stop focusing on Conspiracy Theories! Every citizen from time to time wandered in their thoughts into such sinful scenarios, but that’s what the Reality Mediators were for, to keep us on track. He was sure they would say something like if they want

to make everyone wear items that alert when someone is about to do something wrong, that's a good thing! This will help reduce crime and make society safer. So his MindLink was helping make the world a better place. He could let his fears about WhirlySnake go to rest.

"Aha!" he said outloud as he snapped something into place.

He had finally fixed it. He attached the metallic device to a visor, which lay resting on his workbench. Then he put the visor on his head. Now the device would act as a portable MRI, reading and recording his brain activity while he wore the visor. The prototype MindLink installed inside his body could of course record electrical impulses and even thoughts from his brain. But there was nothing like a good, old fashioned MRI to map out three-dimensionally, in realtime, what was happening in each sector of the brain. He needed to record as much data as possible and analyze it with the help of AI to find out what was triggering the neuro daydreams and how the prototype MindLink device could be adjusted to stop it from happening again.

Now, he would get the data he needed.

Now, he would cure himself.

Suddenly, he was bouncing on his bicycle down the cliff again.

CHAPTER 6: THE REALITY MEDIATOR

Kristal Marie Silverberg, one of the holy Reality Mediators spreading the gospel of the Glorious Government, sat in the reinforced nanoglassplas chair next to her co-anchor Mark, a bead of sweat forming on her forehead under the barrage of spotlights in the Corporate Salvation Network studio, looking over her script on the soft blue holographic screen hovering a few inches over her desk. No use for powder. The sweat would be digitally removed and a thick coat of digital makeup applied to her primitive form which would be broadcast directly to the cerebral cortexes of the corporate citizens throughout the Seatt-Tacoma Corporate Zone. The almost invisible chair she sat on didn't break under the enormous weight of her corporate-saved body because it was a smartchair, utilizing a miraculous nanostructure of "fuckyballs"—those soccerball-shaped doohickies created by—what was his name? Fuckbuller Minster? Okay, she wasn't sure she remembered the exact technical jargon her friend had told her when explaining why the chairs don't break, but she thanked her Corporate Saviors that they didn't. They looked so tiny and weak that every time she sat on one, she thought she would smash it into a million pieces.

The smartchair also could sense by the jiggles vibrating through the fat tissues of her ass if she was nervous, jittery, or otherwise uncomfortable talking about some issue, which meant that the chair, like most objects in the modern world, in this Internet of Things, acted as a narc for the government to tell if she didn't fully believe religiously enough in the one, single approved Holy Doctrine of the Pluralistic Liberal Democracy. She knew that "smart" meant "surveillance," because what else would the Corporate Saviors program smart objects to do other than to surveil their subjects? Everything was connected to the Cloud, the Corporate Savior's super AI that was watching all their subjects at all times. Smart cameras watched citizens for giveaways in the expressions of their eyes and faces. Smart microphones listened attentively for wavering in their voices. And every internet-connected doodad made by the Corporations—hell, what wasn't connected to the internet nowadays?—from watches to clothing to dishwashers—was watching you. Every second of every day was a test to see how obedient, servile, and sycophantic you were. In a liberal democracy such as this,

enhanced by freedom-giving smart technology, the way you avoided being painlessly ended was by fully subscribing to the one set of approved opinions your masters bleated out for you all day every day, so it was impossible to miss. Good thing Kristal was so used to living in a liberal democracy that she could lie and fawn over her masters in such a natural, spontaneous way that the smart objects all around her—and the central AI controlling them all—were all fooled.

She had been lucky enough to land the job at CSN because one of her Govly Makers had recommended her. And because her primitive avatar self happened to be a ridiculous knockout. Primitive avatars were all based on the person's actual appearance, using algorithms to construct what their body would look like without corporate food. She knew that once the cerebralcameras started rolling, administering their strange signals directly into all of the saved citizens' brains, that her gargantuan corporeal mass would be magically transformed into a lovely, sweet little slender thing with a nice rack. And that was one of the things she loved about this job, watching the re-runs later and seeing how gorgeous she looked.

She had been working at CSN for six years, and she was happy with her "job." She thought of it as a job in air quotes because she really didn't do anything. Reality Mediators did not investigate. Reality Mediators did not go on location. Reality Mediators did one thing. They showed up every day at work and read their script. Period. Easiest job ever! The only job requirement was to know nothing about anything. In short, she was an actor. She got paid to read a script.

And that script was reality.

She had no idea who wrote the script. It probably came out of a think tank working for the Corporate Saviors. She knew that everything the Corporate Saviors said was a lie. But she didn't care. In fact, many people, like her, knew that the GG was one big fat lie. But you couldn't speak out against them. They would call you a Conspiracy Theorist, crazy, racist, violent, and a host of other things. The Corporate Saviors had prepared a long list of pejoratives to denigrate anyone who questioned them. And then they would painlessly end you, for the protection of all. She didn't want to lose her job, or to be called those words, or be painlessly ended for the protection of all.

So she just read the fucking script. And all the other mediators did the same.

And, like everyone in society, regardless of her personal feelings for the Corporate Saviors, when she talked with others she loved them, always spoke positively about them, agreed with everything the corporations and government said, etc.

So, like many people, she talked the talk, and walked the walk. If the government decided something was reality, then that was reality. At least, when you're interacting with everyone else in society. If you must question it, do it in the "privacy" of your own thoughts, which would be cleaned later by your mental flosser, or a mentist. And if the mentist questioned you about it, just say it wasn't a sincere thought, or it was in a moment of weakness, or make up some other excuse. But to the public, for god's sake, pretend that you agree with the "socially" constructed "reality"—which meant not the reality constructed by society, but by a tiny group of people who own the corporations and the government. (Yes, the government was basically just another corporation, owned by the same people who owned all the rest of them.)

Kristal knew the one, all-important truism that had saved her life over and over: In a time of universal deceit, telling the truth is a suicidal act. So don't fucking do it. Just lie.

Kristal had gotten to where she was today by lying her ass to the top. She knew it was all fake—in fact, she didn't even trust her own memories, because the corporations had power over those, too. But what she wanted more than anything was to get on nationally syndicated Reality Mediation, so she could be a star across the country. So to stop lying and faking any time soon just wasn't an option for her. Besides, what did they always say...fake it till you make it?

Working on cerebralvision, Kristal knew first-hand just how fake it really was. As a Reality Mediator, she and her department worked hand-in-hand with the government agency known as the Department of Psychological Operations (DPO). During her training, they had used the example from the history of primitive society of Noam Chomsky and Donald Trump to show how easy it was to control the unreading, unthinking public, who all wanted to pretend to be rebels by thinking and doing exactly what their Corporate Saviors told them to think and do. The primitives had had the strange idea

that everyone in the world had to be divided into two camps, which they called “left-wing” and “right-wing.” And these two camps were supposed to fight each other and have the opposite opinions on everything. Chomsky was in the camp called “left-wing” and Trump in the one called “right-wing.” Nevertheless, both Chomsky and Trump had made the exact same claim: that the Corporate News (back when Reality Mediation was called “news”) was fake. The only difference was that Chomksy made the mistake of writing a book about it—called Manufacturing Consent—and provided a wealth of documentary evidence to support the claim. If you write a book, people won’t read it. And if you provide evidence, people won’t look at it. The so-called “leftists” were more interested in Donald Trump’s hair than they were in reading Chomsky’s book about how the news was fake.

No, people don’t want to think, don’t want to read. They only want an actor on CRV to read them a script and tell them what to think—and to do it quickly, conveniently, in no more than a few minutes per day, so they can go back to playing their sims. Or a headline on a corporate article. (People don’t read articles, only headlines.) So they watch a few minutes of Reality Mediation a day or scan a few headlines and take whatever is said as reality. The lazy way to understand reality. Just trust the Corporations to tell it to you.

Chomsky had also stated that media-hyped Donald Trump was really just an actor who played the role of a rich person on TV. Nevertheless, as soon as this actor went on TV and said the Corporate News was fake, all the fake leftists, who apparently never read a book in their life, immediately proclaimed that everything the Corporate News said was 100% real, and that only stupid, Christian rightists thought the Corporate News was fake, despite the Jewish atheist leftist Chomsky having already proven that it was fake. Lazy fairweather leftists were so easy to fool because they never read, just took marching orders from the Corporate Media, just like their rightest counterparts, who did the exact same thing, only they watched the rightist Corporate Media. Which of course was owned by the same group of people who owned the leftist media…the corporations. Duh. Who else?

The people who owned the corporations all had the same interests. They formed one class. The leftists should have

known that they called this class “the capitalist class.” And that they were supposed to be against them. But instead of being against them, they treated this class as their masters and obeyed everything they told them to do using their media corporations.

Why would a class of people with the same interests divide the people into two groups and pit them against each other? Hmm…why, indeed.

The DPO training had demystified this conundrum. By giving the masses two options—left and right—the corporations gave them the illusion of choice, while in reality controlling everything they think. Two sets of lazies, both ready to take marching orders from the corporations and the media they controlled, both ready to fight against each other, keeping the populace divided and conquered.

This was exactly what the class who owned the corporations wanted. This was how they controlled everyone in society.

Psy-Ops 101.

The purpose of this training by the DPO for new recruits in the Corporate Media was to illustrate the point that people don’t read, they don’t think, they just watch actors reading scripts who tell them what to think. And thus, the importance of the job of Reality Mediator. Kristal, by reading the Holy Teleprompter Script given to her by her magnanimous Corporate Saviors, was determining the thoughts of everyone in society. She knew that controlling everyone’s reality was the most important thing their Glorious Government did, and she was helping them achieve this goal.

Minds that read books, meditate, and engage in critical thinking are harder to control. That’s why in the modern age, corporations had heavily invested in distractions like the sims and “entertainment.” Such distractions were vital to controlling minds. Without these distractions, people might actually read books and think for themselves.

And so it was imperative that there should be no reading books, no exercising—which also has beneficial effects on the brain—only staying in sims all day. And the few moments out of the sims were for plugging into Reality Mediation to find out what reality was outside of them and to take marching orders.

It was survival of the stupidest, weakest, best order followers.

But in the age of the Net, everyone had access to information, and thus could potentially find out what the government was telling them was clever social engineering. How to solve this problem?

Simple. A basic two-pronged strategy was all that was needed.

First, prevent them from accessing information.

Then, cure them of the information.

The GG's preventative approach to information was not censorship, but distraction. The government had learned that banning books caused the "Streisand effect," making people even more curious about them. And so the liberal approach of allowing them to read whatever books they wanted to was taken. Meanwhile, they poured billions in R&D into the sims. The gambit had proven to be a success. Given the choice between developing the mind and floating like a cloud in some fantasy world, Homo Sapiens Corporatus almost always chose the latter. Distract the people enough, and you don't need to burn any books.

But what about those few people who still decide to read books? The other area into which they had poured billions—Thought Management Technology—made this matter child's play. Simply erase their memories of those books.

Thus the two-pronged approached to information management: distraction played the role of prevention, and obviated 99% of problems, while erasure was curative, and solved the rest.

"Kristal, are you ready?" Her producer Mick, a roley-poley with greying hair and tiny loop earrings said, pulling her out of her reverie.

"Uh…yeah."

"Going live in five, four, three, two…"

Cheesy corporate music started up, and Kristal smiled for the camera. Now in the minds of millions of citizens, her lovely, digital, primitive image was being projected. Same auburn hair and clear blue eyes as in real life, but in a sleek, scrumptious body with curves that said "vavoom!" Cerebralvision appeared as a flat image, floating in the citizens' mind, not a 3D space to explore like the sims. CRV, as it was sometimes called, had

been developed years before the sims and the eyelid screens, and could be watched with eyes open. But the citizens couldn't see anything while watching it, as they stared into space.

Directly in front of Kristal floated the Holy Teleprompter, which was a hologram of the script she was about to read, written out in glorious, shining blue letters which would scroll gently upwards as she read them. The citizens wouldn't be able to see the Holy Teleprompter.

The music faded away, and she did what she did best, which was to read her holy script. She read it in a condescending tone, as if, if you didn't agree with her, you were a plague upon humanity, a trick used in totalitarian societies which called themselves free societies all the way back to the primitive corporate "news."

"Welcome back, fellow corporate citizens, to Reality Tonight. This evening we go live to our correspondent Kathy, who is at the government vats located on Lot 33 of 33 Thirty-Third Avenue, where today at 3:33pm, 33 vats were each shot 33 times by 33 terrorists. The entire attack took only 3 minutes and 33 seconds. There were also immediately 33 calls into the center by concerned parents, all of whom live in the 33rd apt highrise 33 miles from the vats. And that just took me 33 seconds to list all those 33s...whew! Here to explain to us why on earth someone would do such a horrible thing is my correspondent, Kathy."

Right above and behind the Holy Teleprompter a hologram of a primitive Asian woman holding a mic appeared. She knew corporate citizens' cerebralvision would show the image of both her and Kathy in split-screen view. The hologram of Kathy also included her surroundings. She was encompassed on all sides by hundreds of crystalline, transparent, egg-shaped vats with fetuses floating inside of them. Though the people and places she interviewed were projected as holograms in the studio, everything was fed as a flat image into the citizens' minds via CRV.

"Salve, Kristal. I'm here at the government vats surrounded by a bunch of fetuses. Now, these vats are protected by the best security in the nation. Our Glorious Government spares no expense to protect your and my children. That's why just a few hours before the shooting started, they were doing an active

terrorist drill, preparing exactly for this kind of attack. But only hours after the drill, against all odds, the very thing they were preparing against somehow happened."

Kristal replied, now feigning sorrow, "Kathy, thanks for being on the scene at such a horrific, gut-wrenching event. Now we go to a heartbreaking interview with one of the unfortunate mothers of the murdered vatbabies."

The holo of Kathy abruptly disappeared and was replaced by the holo of a woman with short blonde hair and ruddy complexion. She was looking off to the side at someone off-screen, as if unaware of being filmed. She had an enormous grin on her face, as if this were the best day of her life. Suddenly, she noticed the camera was rolling, wiped the grin off her face, and quickly got into character, hyperventilating and acting like a person under extreme duress. Below her appeared the name "Sandee Hooker." And below her name was written, "Amateur Actress and Presstitute." She looked into the camera and began to sob non-existent tears as she began her story.

"My precious little vatbaby Timothy was one of the ones that got totally ripped to shreds." For a moment, she smirked again, a gleam in her eye, as if enjoying the attention of finally getting her chance to be on cerebralvision, but then got quickly back into character, once again heartbroken. "I was there, visiting him on his negative third birthmonth, when suddenly I heard a loud voice yell, 'Everybody get down! I'm gonna blow these babies away!' I hit the floor immediately and just lay there. Then I heard a bunch of bullets whiz past my head, and then suddenly my baby's vat bursts open, and the bullet-riddled fetus of my dead baby lands on me." As she spoke, she began giggling and smiling more and more, as if she found something funny. Finally, she got back into character once more and started dry sobbing as she bawled, "And now I have no son! No little baby! And I had to see Timothy's dead fetus, with its blood dripping all over me. Thanks to those no good…bad people our Glorious Government protects us from… except when they don't. Like now." She quickly giggled and then acted mournful again as she wiped a non-existent tear away from her dry eyes. Then her hologram disappeared.

Kristal looked into the camera and delivered an impassioned speech. "One thing is clear: because our Glorious

Government completely failed to protect us from this catastrophic loss of life, that is why we ***must*** put all our trust in those same people to protect us from this type of attack in the future, even though they're the same ones who gloriously failed to protect us from this horrific attack, even after doing drills specifically to prepare for this exact kind of attack. And even more importantly, we need to all do anything and everything those who failed to stop this attack tell us to do, no matter how ridiculous or ineffective it is, or how much it strips away our freedoms. Our Glorious Government and their glorious failure to stop this terrorist attack should keep us all living in fear and obedient to the ones who failed to protect us from this attack until the next one, which they will also fail to stop."

Kristal patted herself mentally on the back. My acting skills are ***so*** much better than that pathetic Sandee Hooker lady they interviewed.

"We now bring on an expert in these type of attacks, Dr. Sewell Conway, professional Coincidence Theorist. Dr. Conway received his PhD in Coincidence Theory at Princeton University."

The holo of an older gentleman with a grey beard and old-fashioned wooden pipe appeared in front of Kristal.

"Dr. Conway, some citizens who have badthoughts might think it's weird that the government did a drill for that exact scenario hours before it actually occurred in real life. What would you say to those badthinking morons who don't believe everything the Glorious Government and the Corporations tell them?"

There were no leftists or rightists anymore. There were only goodthinkers and badthinkers. The government had streamlined things. Those who thought what the corporations and government wanted them to think were goodthinkers, and those who didn't were badthinkers.

Of course, that had been the purpose of the primitive concepts of "left-wing" and "right-wing" all along, Kristal knew from the DPO training. Reductionism to the extreme. Reduce every possible idea in the universe to a simple binary: on or off, zero or one, left or right, red or blue. And that reducing down to two options had helped them funnel everyone into the way of thinking that they wanted, had allowed them to reduce

down even more, to only one option. Now, there was only one approved way to think: goodthink. Everything else was a crime.

"I would tell them that it was just a coincidence," the learned grey-haired man replied knowingly as he took a puff off his pipe.

"And badthinkers might say, 'Isn't it weird that even after preparing for that exact scenario only hours before, they still gloriously failed to stop the attack?'"

"That, also, is just a coincidence."

"And what about the fact that everything to do with this attack had the number 33 written all over it—the address, the number of vats attacked, the number of terrorists…?"

"Coincidence."

"And isn't it interesting that the mother of one of the alleged victims also happens to be an aspiring actress in real life?" And not a very good one at that, Kristal thought to herself.

"That, I'm afraid, is yet another coincidence."

"And why do you think that amateur actress was in such a good mood, right after having her baby murdered in front of her eyes?"

"Coinkydink."

"There you have it folks! An expert, a scholar, an academic who spent years and years studying statistics and probability has just confirmed it. Everything that happens in this world is just a coincidence! So don't read too much into it! Because reading into things, or analyzing things is evil. So keep those badthoughts at bay! Thank you, Dr. Conway."

"You're welcome, Kristal. Always a pleasure."

Kristal knew this man was paid millions of admincreds to pretend to look scholarly and just say everything the government does is a coincidence. Nice work, if you can get it. But she preferred her more complicated job as a mediator, where you have to actually read a teleprompter, instead of giving one-word answers.

The holo of Dr. Conway disappeared, and Kristal continued. "Recently a redcoat injun Nazi Commie Islamic white people web site was shut down, sending shockwaves through the adipose tissue of corporate-saved society." Why use only one

boogyman when you could mash them all together? Mediating had become such a fine-tuned tool in modern society, putting primitive "news" to shame. "The site was run by anti-democracy terrorists, and was alleged to have spread false, fake news about Conspiracy Theories that FattyChemCo's holy Manna is making people fat. That part is true. It does make us fat. That is why we eat it. But the horrifying part of the web site's pernicious lies are false claims that having too much fat can cause you to have diabetes, heart attacks, or strokes."

Suddenly an enormous gunt appeared in front of Kristal in the air. The gunt kept expanding and expanding until it filled up most of the studio.

A collective gasp rippled through all present, from Kristal to all the many technicians running around, all the way to Mick the producer, all fearful for their lives. Would this larger-than-life cavity keep growing until it consumed them all? Then they realized simultaneously. Oh yeah, it's just our next guest. They breathed a sigh of relief.

Kristal continued. "Here to help us sift through the web of lies and misinformation is the Health Czar of our Glorious Government." Kristal knew that somewhere behind the gunt, behind all the rolls of fat, there was actually a head. It wasn't a gunt…it was the hologram of Woman King Wizzo! "Former rapper and celebrity, Woman King Wizzo won last year's 'healthiest citizen' award. Welcome back on the show, Wizzo."

"Thank you, Kristal. Always a pleasure."

Unlike the rest of the guests, Wizzo was always projected to the minds of the citizens in her healthy, corporate-saved form, not as a primitive avatar, since she was representing health. As she orbited, the rest of her body slowly became visible behind her gunt. It was unknown whether she had breasts, for if she did, they appeared no different than the rest of the rolls of fat that intermediated the space between her gunt and her head. It could be noted that she was an African American woman who, judging by her almond eyes and creamy coffee complexion might have been good-looking, if her body mass was reduced by a factor of ten. Long, straight, plastic-looking pink hair vyed for attention with her most prominent feature and lost. Tight black pleather that looked like it was begging to be put on a sofa rather than this precipitous crevice was sucked into the void of her veritable

black hole of a pubic cavity. Guinness had been quick to name it the largest mons pubis known to man. As the biggest, most adipose havingest, most vagina-havingest, non-pale-skin-havingest citizen in the nation, Wizzo was the paragon of pure and absolute govliness. She had won the genetic jackpot. Born African ***and*** a woman ***and*** asexual, the government had showered her accordingly with opportunity and privilege. They had appointed her Health Czar because she was the perfect embodiment of the government health motto: The bigger they are, the healthier they are.

"Wizzo, what do you make of all these lies and Conspiracy Theories about increased adipose tissue being harmful?"

"Well Kristal, the reports are troubling, since we know that heart attacks, strokes, and diabetes are not caused by having too much adipose, which is, as we all know, beneficial to our body and prevents disease, but by a variety of random causes such as shoveling snow, breathing too much, being too happy, thinking unapproved badthoughts, masturbating, as well as a host of other reasons. These unfortunate diseases are definitely not caused by the wonderful products manufactured by FattyChemCo foods, which are 100% approved by our Glorious Government. So the fact that anyone would believe in such ludicrous claims is simply unfathomable to me."

Kristal nodded the whole time, as if agreeing. "Now, for full disclosure I must tell our viewing audience that FattyChemCo is one of our sponsors. But that has nothing to do with our viewpoints here on the show. Wizzo—playing the devil's advocate—some badthinkers might say that those web sites should be able to say whatever they want and that people should be allowed to think whatever they want. What would you say to that?"

"In order to let people think what they want, first you have to threaten everyone with violence to make sure everyone has the same thoughts. Then, after everyone is on the same page, and knows they'll get the shit beat out of them if they don't think the thoughts their masters want them to have—or at bare minimum they'll lose their monthly income and starve—then allowing them to think what they want is fine."

"You're absolutely right, Wizzo. People believing in these unapproved web sites, which don't come from the elite 1%

who own the Corporations, and instead come from the 99% who don't own any corporations, is an attack on Science, on democracy, and on freedom. Democracy means everyone believing what the 1% tell them to believe."

Kristal's co-anchor Mark spoke up. "But what about that crazy ancient idea that in democracy, people should have freedom of thought?" Mark was a thirtyish man whose corporate hairdo had too much mousse in it and whose mouth seemed to be permanently stuck in an "O"-like shape. All sex was forbidden, but apparently sucking corporate dick was not.

What the hell was Mark thinking, going off script like that? Had he taken a few too many Magic Pills today?

Kristal suddenly lost her cool, collected composure. She actually looked angry at Mark on camera. "But Mark…don't you remember those scripts our bosses write for us that we always read for the camera? ***'People thinking for themselves—instead of letting Corporations think for them—this is extremely dangerous to our democracy!"***

Wizzo was more composed and serene than Kristal. "Remember Govly Article #124: It is necessary to have censorship, in order to have freedom of thought," she recited. Govly Articles were like koans of doublethink, twisting the citizens' minds into the pretzels the Corporate Saviors wanted them to be. The DPO training had explained that the more contradictions you could get the people to believe in, the more they were enslaved to you.

Whew! Good thing Wizzo was on the ball. Kristal kept going, not giving Mark enough time to speak. "Wizzo, Why do you think our Glorious Government hasn't taken more action to silence these voices who don't agree with the Corporate view and liberally and painlessly end these sons of bitches?"

"I'm glad you asked that, Kristal," Wizzo replied. "I think part of the reason is—"

Suddenly Wizzo's eyes went wide. She clutched her chest. Then, all at once, she toppled backwards, going gunt up.

Mick looked scathingly at the cameramen. "What the hell just happened?" he breathed under his breath. The cameramen looked at each other and shrugged.

But suddenly the health czar made a noise and was righting herself.

"Don't worry, it was just a baby heart attack. I have several of those per day. It's actually a good thing. When you have a heart attack, you know the corporate food is doing it's job. Now where was I…?"

Kristal stole a glance at Mick. The old producer did this every time. He knew this was normal for this guest, but still freaked out like he'd never seen it before. What surprised Kristal more was that the health czar hadn't keeled over sooner. But somehow she plodded along.

Wizzo continued. "Oh yeah, I was about to say that the reason we still have all these Conspiracy Theory websites is that we as citizens have failed to do our part in hating anyone who has opinions differing from the opinions our rulers tell us to have through their Corporate Media. That is why starting tomorrow at 2pm Eastern, the Corporations are going to roll out Two Minutes Hate against anybody who questions the Corporations' narrative in anyway. Now, in order to participate, citizens will need to dye their hair blue, green, or pink and wear black, horn-rimmed glasses. Also, their gunt alone will need to weigh at least three hundred pounds. Meeting these minimum requirements will show your unending devotion to your Corporate Saviors enough to qualify you to be part of the Two Minutes Hate. And then during the two minutes, you are going to need to show your love for your masters even more by screeching and howling like a pack of ravenous wolves at anyone who dares to question—or heaven forbid criticize—the Corporations or the Government in any way. So stock up on even more FattyChemCo food and healthen up if you ain't up to the minimum healthiness standard. I know I sure as hell is, bitches! But just in case, I'm gonna show my love for my Corporate Saviors by eating this Hostage cupcake."

Wizzo pulled out a large cupcake, covered by loads of chocolate icing. On the top of the cupcake, drawn in white icing, were a pair of handcuffs with a white swirly chain connecting them. Kristal knew this cupcake would appear in a close-up shot in the minds of the citizens, along with some subliminal neural impulses to have feelings of hunger, desire to consume more Corporate products, and submission to the Corporate Saviors' will. Wizzo smiled while looking into the camera. "Hostage is a subsidiary of FattyChemCo, and makes artisan snack cakes for people with Stockholm syndrome for

their Corporate Saviors. Want to truly show your love for our fantabulous Saviors? Then feed your gunt-baby and eat a Hostage cupcake today!"

Wizzo then shoved the cupcake greedily into her mouth, closed her eyes as if in ecstasy, and started passionately making out with it. Then, suddenly, mid-moan, her eyes went wide and she keeled over again.

Mick's eyes boggled once again. He was looking at Kristal, making a exaggerated motion as if slicing his neck with his hand. Kristal knew she needed to wrap this up quickly.

"Alrighty then," Kristal quickly put in. "So make sure to not believe in the lies of those who don't agree with us, the Corporate Media, and instead buy delicious, healthy Corporate products, such as Hostage cupcakes, and eat them today! Now to you, Mark!"

Mark took over and the holo of the belly-up health czar quickly disappeared and was replaced by the next guest, Nicolas Randolf, a politician. Mark quickly began interviewing him as if nothing had happened.

Whew! Kristal's segment was over. Now she could let Mark do all the laborious work of teleprompter-reading. Let's hope he doesn't go off-script again.

As Mark conversed with Randolf, her thoughts meandered. On her own time, always intent on finding opportunities and getting ahead, she had done what her Corporate job as a journalist prohibited her from doing: investigating. She had researched the man her co-anchor would interview next, after the politician. Chappy McScottish was his real name, although most people were unaware of that. Many people of Jewish ethnicity, like Kristal, had spoken out against this fraud, and they had been painlessly ended for being "anti-semites." You see, this fraud of a man had assumed a fake Jewish name and identity several years ago after he had realized he could better oppress mankind by pretending to be a victim. This despicable man, under the guise of fighting "anti-semitism" was murdering Jews. A holocaust, in the name of fighting anti-semitism. Being of Jewish ethnicity herself, and more importantly being a human being, Kristal wanted to speak out, but knew if she did, she would meet their same fate, and become part of the holocaust being carried out by McScottish. So she tried to think about it as little as possible and just

focused on advancing her career and not being painlessly ended.

Finally, Mark had finished the interview with Randolf, and was transitioning to the next interview.

"Think you're safe from Conspiracy Theorists?" Mark said in his patronizing news anchor voice. "Experts say, the number of extremists and radicalists is growing, as anti-Science aggression spreads. Dangerous individuals questioning the safety and efficacy of MagicPillCo's holy, sacrosanct, uncriticizable Magic Pills have been coalescing into terror cells, spreading their hateful, anti-government, misogynist, anti-semitic rhetoric. Joining me live is the absolute richest and most powerful man in the world, Oprest Viktimstein, Corporate Saving Officer of MagicPillCo to tell us why if you don't take his pills daily and make him even richer, you might be an anti-semitic terrorist."

The holographic form of a man in thick-rimmed glasses appeared behind the Holy Teleprompter. An eccentric Corporate Savior, Viktimstein was immediately recognizable by his black hoiche hat and dark sidelocks, along with the characteristic silver toga of the Saviors.

"Salve, Savior Viktimstein," Mark fawned obsequiously.

"Salve, Mark. Happy to be back on the show," Viktimstein replied in a thick Scottish brogue.

"Your Saviorship, first of all, can you explain to our audience…what is the definition of 'anti-semitism'?"

"Anti-semitism means anyone who doesn't want the government spying on their thoughts, anybody who doesn't want to be part of the Asexual Pride Movement, anyone who disagrees with the holy Reality Mediation, and especially anyone who criticizes my company's pills in any way or who doesn't want the government to force them to be injected with stuff."

"So…basically anyone who doesn't do what you want them to do?"

"Exactly. By the way, those injections are also manufactured by MagicPillCo. It helps me make loads and loads of money when the government forces people to be injected with my company's drugs. Just a fun fact."

"Excellent, my Savior. Now, moving on…your given name is

Oprest. Some of our viewing audience seated at home on their reinforced nanocouches may be wondering...what type of name is that?

"It's Semitic."

"What exactly is 'Semitic'?"

"Nobody actually knows, but it's bad to be against it."

"Marvelous. I agree 110%. Now, before we continue, let's welcome our other guest. Along with the world's richest man, we have today the world's richest athlete to also talk about how oppressed he is. Please welcome Kryin Whinernick. Welcome, Kryin."

The hologram of a very light African American man appeared next to Savior Viktimstein. The man wore a gigantic afro, almost the size of Wizzo's gunt, as if to make up for the fact that he probably had more European ancestors than African.

"Thanks Mark," Whinernick said. Then he turned to Viktimstein. "Hold up. You're oppressed because of something that happened 150 years ago? Damn! I got you beat, brotha! I'm oppressed because of something that happened almost 500 years ago!"

Kristal thought it was ridiculous how Reality Mediation had devolved from supposedly reporting on events to interviews with the world's most powerful people, all pretending to be victims.

Mark went on. "Your Corporateness, as we all know, anti-semitism is on the rise. Can you explain its dangers to you and your Corporations' profits?"

"Thank you Mark. You're absolutely right. Anti-semitism—in other words, criticism of me or disobeying me—is on the rise. And this time, it's coming from—of all people—Jews."

"Anti-semitism is coming from Jews? Explain how that works." Mark said.

"Yeah, explain how that works, my jigga," Whinernick put in.

"That's right, Jews. They had visited unapproved, uncorporate web sites that were making hateful, racist, misogynistic, and of course, anti-semitic, claims that I was profiting off of people taking Magic Pills. And that hurt my feelings. So I painlessly ended the sons o' bitches. This year alone, I painlessly ended five thousand Jewish people who

were speaking out against my company MagicPillCo and claiming that thousands of people are killed each year by side effects caused by my glorious, corporate, uncriticizable Magic Pills. And they were also making weird claims that I have red hair. And anyone who thinks I shouldn't have killed those five thousand Jews is an anti-semite, because I will remind everyone that I am a Jew, and therefore any criticism of me is criticism of all Jews and Jewishness in general."

The smartchair Kristal was sitting on was probably picking up the jiggles from her fat ass. So be it, she thought. This man infuriated her. She hated people who played the victim. Especially people who used the deaths of people in the past to enslave people today.

Jewish people murdered in the past was horrible. Not because of their ethnicity, but because they were human beings. Oppressing human beings, regardless of color or ethnicity is unacceptable. But this man was one of the rulers of mankind—he was one of the ***oppressors***, not the oppressed. For him to pretend to be a victim because of things that happened to other people in the past, whether or not they were the same ethnicity as he, was absurd.

If anything, she was the one being victimized by this man, Chappy McScottish. Kristal was Jewish—ethnically speaking, of course; in terms of religion she was an atheist—but this man masquerading as some kind of strict Jew was not even Jewish at all. So feeling like a victim was how a normal person would think.

But she wasn't a normal person.

Kristal hated the victim mentality. And she wasn't such a weak-minded individual that her entire identity rested on her ethnicity. In her opinion the best people of any ethnicity, were the ones who didn't go around talking about their ethnicity 24/7. So you had ancestors. Who gives a fuck? We all had ancestors. What have you done with your life that makes you interesting? If you can't think of anything but your ancestors, that's because you, as an individual, are not an interesting person. And your ancestors, if they could see you, would probably be ashamed of you. It would be really annoying if someone went around all day talking about their Anglo ancestors, or German ancestors, and talked about nothing else—and more importantly did nothing else—she realized. So I'm

going to make my ancestors proud of me, she thought to herself, by actually doing something with my life, and shut the fuck up about my ethnicity. I am not a victim. I am a strong and powerful woman. Anyone who plays the victim is the opposite of a strong and powerful woman, or strong and powerful anything. The victim mentality, while politically opportunistic, was not a healthy mentality to espouse. Even if you are a victim or oppressed somehow, it's far healthier and more empowering to focus on the things you do have control over. That's what she was doing. She was working her way up in this oppressive society by being useful to people, not whining about how oppressed her ancestors were.

Yes, if Kristal wanted to play the ethnicity card, she could. She was a Jew, not McScottish. And she had no problem at all with her ethnicity and ancestors. Many an intelligent thinker who had helped her shape her view of the world were ethnic Jews. Such important figures from history as Baruch Spinoza, Franz Kafka, Sigmund Freud, Abraham Maslow, Shel Silverstein… And above all, the greatest Jew of all time…Mel Brooks. Show me one film made after the primitive film Spaceballs that was that fucking hilarious! There was nothing bad at all about being a Jew. She was in good company.

But Kristal thought it was idiotic to go around bragging about something that one didn't choose…their ethnicity. Better to just forget about ethnicity altogether and realize we are all human beings, and treat each other as human beings.

No doubt McScottish would call my thoughts right now "antisemitic." I'm not anti-semitic, you crazy idiot! I'm not criticizing jews! I am a Jew! And I like Jews! I'm criticizing you, McScottish! And people like you. There are millions of Jews, and only a tiny handful of people who control all of society by controlling capital and controlling people's reality. The Corporate Saviors. That's not the same group of people at all.

Kristal had really done a deep dive on this man. Everything about him—not just his name and Jewish identity—was fake. He claimed to be the richest man in the world, but there was much evidence to the contrary. He claimed to visit a synagogue every week, but those who attended the synagogue near his home claimed to have never seen him there. (Although the government had proclaimed that "God is dead," they allowed their subjects to continue visiting places

like synagogues for social and cultural reasons.) He claimed to have the highest IQ of anyone on the planet, but there was evidence of the administrators of the IQ test being paid off. In short, there was only one thing he was good at: lying.

But she was forced to keep her findings to herself. She realized that part of taking part in "polite" society—which was anything but polite—was calling black white and white black. Therefore "fighting anti-semitism" actually meant killing Jews, making citizens healthy actually meant slowly killing them with toxic chemicals, and so on. Just like Orwell. The Ministry of Truth spread lies, the Ministry of Love tortured and killed. Just apply that to not only specific government departments, but literally everything the government and corporations say, and you will understand the reality of the modern age.

Fuck. She realized she had just gone off the rails and engaged in a badthoughtstream. Oh well, it'll be wiped out soon at my next visit to the mental clinic. Good thing she was one of the most beloved Reality Mediators. For her badthoughts they'd just give her a slap on the jiggly fat ass and tell her to behave.

Kristal focused her attention back on what her co-anchor was saying.

"So what you're saying, if I hear you correctly, Savior Viktimstein, is that any criticism of the products your company makes are an attack on all Jewishness, is that right?"

"That's precisely correct, Mark."

"So therefore, when it was claimed that your Magic Pills cause fainting, or suddenly blacking…suddenly blacking…oh, god, I'm not feeling good…" Mark was staring at a point ahead of him as if he had been caught in the headlights of a huge truck. Suddenly, he swooned and fell backwards off his smartchair. His corporate-saved body hit the ground with a gigantic crash, creating a huge crater in the marble floor.

Oh, shit. That sort of thing was happening more and more often. So now Kristal would have to interview that asshole, McScottish, after all. Fuck!

Whinernick spoke up. "But what about those five thousand Jews you killed this year?" He seemed to not be paying attention to the fact that the anchor had just fallen off his chair.

Yes! Whinernick to the rescue!

"What about them?" Viktimstein retorted.

"Isn't it anti-semitic to kill five thousand Jews?"

Whew! Keep asking him questions, Whinernick, so I don't have to talk with that dipshit, Kristal thought.

"No, it's not. Because they are poor Jews who don't own a Corporation and are not billionaires, like me. They aren't up here telling everyone what is or isn't anti-semitic. Remember, we Corporate Saviors own the Reality Mediation Corporations, therefore we control what people think. Just like Marx said. Those who control the means of production control the ideology of the people. And we decided that anti-semitic means hating the Corporate Saviors. Poor Jews aren't controlling the definition of anti-semitism, so screw them. You can do whatever you want to poor Jews, just not to me and the Corporate Saviors."

"Wait, I don't get this." Whinernick looked confused. "So this is really not about Jews, this is just about you. You get special protection, but no one else does."

"That's basically it. The rest of the Jews are schmucks. I hate them all."

"Wow!" Whinernick said, genuinely overwhelmed. "How is that not anti-semitic?"

"The rules don't apply to rich people. We make the rules. We don't follow them."

"Wait, so what about those six million Jews that were killed in the holocaust? I'm pretty sure a lot of them were poor, so does that mean it was okay for Hitler to kill them?"

"Most of those kills were probably fine. Actually, they definitely were, because they didn't involve hating me or impeding on my profits in any way. In fact, I probably would have liked Hitler, he seemed like a swell enough guy. We both hate poor Jews, so I think I could get along with that."

"Man, this is unbelievable. Sounds like you hate your own people, and you're just using this whole 'anti-semitic' thing to get ahead of them. So if I were like you, I would want to kill poor African Americans." Whinernick seemed to be headed on the path of being painlessly ended. Seemed like he wanted to become a real martyr instead of a fake one.

"I think you should probably get started on that. You have enough money to. Just hire some Reality Mediators to call

those poor African Americans racist anti-black bigots, and then it will be fine to painlessly end them. Oh..wait..are we still live? I forgot I'm on an interview on cerebralvision. I take my own Magic Pills, so sometimes I get dazed and confused and forget where I am. Aw, fuck it, we'll just get the mental clinics to erase the memory of today's interview from all the citizens' minds. Okay, nice chatting with you, Kryin. Let me know how it goes with the African American genocide. Shalom, nigga." The holo of Viktimstein blinked into a tiny white dot, then disappeared, leaving only the holo of the stunned Whinernick.

Ever since the Corporate Saviors rolled out the mental clinics with their memory erasure technology, they had become ever bolder in what they said in public. Public Relations scandals were rarely ever a problem anymore. They simply erased the memory of them from the citizens.

So it turned out Whinernick had too much money to really become a martyr after all. Seems the Corporate Saviors wouldn't painlessly end someone if they thought they could get some use out of them.

But Whinernick didn't seem to get it. He looked at Kristal. "He seemed kind of out of it, today. Man, those Magic Pills musta fucked him up good. Kinda like poor Mark over there." Whinernick looked down at the floor at the spread eagle corporate-saved body with a crater around it.

Kristal suddenly noticed her producer Mick making frantic gestures at her that she needed to wrap this up.

Kristal suddenly perked up and looked into the camera. "Uh...So there you have it, folks! Basically all of Corporate Media can be summed up in these few words: If you're poor, and you don't do what rich people tell you, then you're an evil word, and you're a threat to society, according to rich people and their media, which is who I work for!" God, what was she saying? She was still on air. Ah, fuck it. They'll just have to wipe this memory from the citizens, too. Regardless, she caught herself and went back to reading the blue Holy Teleprompter words floating in front of her. "Join us next time, as we bring Dr. Conway back on to discuss why my co-anchor crashing to the ground is just another coincidence which has absolutely nothing to do with MagicPillCo's drugs, as well as how 666 black cats were found dead on 666th street! Until next time, this has been Kristal Silverberg, mediating your reality!"

DIARY OF THE UNSAVED: LEADERS

The young man sat in his hut, pen in hand. He was about half the size he was when he started this diary. And his handwriting was getting much better now. It didn't look like a savage's handwriting, he decided. He even held the pen more comfortably and confidently as he wrote:

There are no leaders, judges, enforcers, or violence among the Unsaved.

First, leaders. There are no leaders among the Unsaved. Neither political nor religious. Everyone has an equal voice and equal platform in society.

The concept of authority doesn't exist among the Unsaved. If someone were to have the audacity to claim that they have authority over another person, or that they can represent other people, they would be immediately exiled.

There are no representatives among the Unsaved. Representatives are just leaders in sheep's clothing.

The concept of people making rules that other people are supposed to follow doesn't exist among the Unsaved. Here it is understood that you can make all the rules you want—and that you will be the only person expected to follow those rules.

If you are not hurting anyone, you can do anything you want.

The judges and enforcers are the people themselves.

If there is a matter that involves a small number of people only, then only those people are involved. If there is a matter which involves everyone, then a town meeting is called, and everyone is allowed to share their opinion on the matter, even children. And then, all agree on a course of action. Nothing is done until a consensus is reached. This may sound impossible at first. But, it is not as difficult as it may seem. They usually are able to easily agree on even the most divisive of issues, after everyone has thoroughly discussed the matter using logic and reason, deciding what course serves the needs of the group without

violating the individual.

There is no violence among the Unsaved. If anyone were to commit violence against anyone else, it would be considered a threat to the safety of all, and a town meeting would be held to discuss what to do with the offender. Since no one wants to face the wrath of everyone else, I have not seen one violent act so far during my time here. The closest was a heated argument, but the friends of those involved quickly calmed them down. It doesn't make sense for us to fight and quarrel. We are all in this together.

There are no religious leaders among the Unsaved. Here there is both freedom *of* religion and freedom *from* religion. If they so desire, people can study on their own or form groups to talk about spiritual matters, but no one is anyone else's savior or mediator. Everyone works out their salvation on their own, whether it be physical, mental, or spiritual.

Since I don't agree with the dualistic view of the universe, I am of the opinion that the spiritual doesn't exist, and thus focus on my physical and mental salvation. However, I have met several people here who spend hours every day meditating on the spiritual, on dualism, metaphysics, and other such topics. I consider what is called the spiritual basically to be the mental, but others are of the opinion that there is something other than the physical which connects us to nature and all of existence. Well, anything is possible. I don't criticize them for their efforts, especially since the path they walk is personal and they don't use it as a way to gain power over others. They are not like the primitive religious fanatics, who thought they were the judges of all and thought their god wanted them to convert everyone to their way of thinking. As long as they don't try to force their views on others, I have no problems with the religious people here. In general, they are really nice, interesting people to talk with.

There is nothing here that can be called "organized religion." And definitely no one here asks for money or a portion of your labor in exchange for salvation in a world to come.

In fact, that's another thing they don't have here: money. Which I shall explain in my next entry.

CHAPTER 7: IMAGINATIVE MENTATION

They had set up their first meeting at Kristal's place. He had used the Location Spoofer in his Hacking Tools to make it look as if he was in his apt. There were cameras all over the place, but he knew that the AI no longer identified citizens based on facial recognition, since holo-faces were so ubiquitous; that would just confuse and freeze up the system. Each citizen's smartphone held their government ID, which was used to track them instead. But with the Spoofer, it would now show that his government ID was sitting at home. On top of that, he knew from an internal memo that the Cloud would be offline for precisely one hour today for maintenance, so he chose this time to strike.

Drake was a bit nervous, as he stood outside the door of Kristal's apartment. She had never seen him in real life, only in their session together at Rosewood. What would she think of his roley-poley body and large, chubby face? He wouldn't look like she remembered him from their interaction in the Forest of Memories, with his primitive body.

And then there was the matter of meeting with a patient outside of work. Due to the nature of his job, Drake had never taken the risk before. As a Reality Fixer, Drake was a government shadow operative, or GSO. He didn't exist. Only the Corporate Saviors, his superiors at the Department of Thought Management, and the mentists—who were required to employ their services from time to time—knew of their existence. Even mediators like Silverberg, celebrities highly paid by media corporations and the government, were unaware of their existence.

So what was he doing here? Was it worth taking the risk? He knew she didn't look the way she appeared on cerebralvision, a drop-dead, gorgeous, primitive knockout. He had seen her roley-poley body briefly when he had come and gone to the clinic. He hadn't seen her at all during the time they spent together, only the avatars of her mother and the child version of her. And her friend the squirrel. He saw, of course, her photo on the dossier Dr. Richards had provided on the terminal. She looked like a normal, modern woman, obeying the slogan all vatlings learned in government Science class, "A fatass citizen is a healthy citizen."

But he knew there was something different about her. She had flouted the Corporate Savior's rules. She had treated him

not as a professional, not as a corporate citizen, but as a friend.

And there was something different about her mind. She had mental abilities that other people didn't. She could be a useful ally in this world where so much of the struggle for power, so much of existence itself was in the mind.

He was acutely aware that what he was doing now could lose him his job…or worse.

But he had to do it. He had to take the risk.

Because for the first time in twenty years, every day hating his existence, every day dead to the world, he felt like he had finally found someone…someone he could reach out to.

He exhaled deeply and rang the doorbell.

Kristal answered.

And for a brief moment, the two roley-poleys just stared at each other. Kristal in a large pink corporate-saved muumuu, and Drake in a huge blue silk shirt with faux-collar and dark grey slacks.

There was tense silence for a moment, and then they both burst out in laughter.

Kristal spoke first. "Well, finally our corporate bodies meet. Come in."

Drake entered the apartment and she motioned him to a white reinforced nanocouch with red floral print. He sat down.

"So, how's…your memory?"

"Which one?" Kristal sat down on the couch next to Drake.

"Well, you know…of your mother."

First things first. Let's see if the memory was successfully suppressed.

"Ah, yes, of course. My mother. Well, the most vivid memory I have of my mother is her giving the most fervent, wonderful prayer I've ever heard to our Corporate Saviors, and then suddenly, there were shiny lights and the voice of God came out of nowhere. That was before they assigned her to that top-secret mission. I remember having the original memory, of course, but now it's even more brilliant and lifelike, now that you spruced it up. It's like it happened yesterday! I hope you can spruce it up a few years from now when it fades again."

Amazing! His false memory had worked! Where so many other Reality Fixers had failed, he had succeeded. Apparently he was not like all the others. He had the touch. That stick-up-

the-ass Jenkins at the DTM and Savior Wolfe would see the follow up report done by the scrapers. Drake could smell the promotion coming already.

Drake had not erased Kristal's memory of breaking through and interacting with him in her MindWorld, but instead sequestered it in a single-instance cloaked partition so the Cloud wouldn't find it. Then he had altered it so she thought that his job had been to spruce up her fading memories of her mother. It was at once exhilarating that his memory had stuck, but awkward that she didn't remember the real reason they had met.

"Do you want to see my mother's medals?"

"Sure," Drake said.

She got up and he followed her to a bureau upon which rested a holographic scene. Her mother being awarded a medal by Savior Sugarmountain, that weird android-looking thing. Nobody was really for sure whether he was human. Behind them could be seen members of the Corporate Guard holding their laser axes. Kristal pressed a glowing blue button sticking up from the surface of the bureau—a holo button—and the scene in the hologram changed. This one was of her mother and her, posing together. She pressed the button again. Her mother as a new vatling wearing a white dress. And again. Her mother's graduation ceremony from Govly Academy. Above the holographic scene, on the wall, rested a glass container which housed a gold and purple medal in the shape of a human brain, hanging from a purple ribbon. Below it, there hung several other medals, some of them gold, others silver, all of them with the emblem of the PLDGG, a neo-fasces. The neo-fasces consisted of a laser axe entwined by several shiny mental cables. The laser axe was ceremonial and symbolized the GG's monopoly of violence. The Corporate Guard carried it at certain Corporatist rituals. In everyday practice, however, they used only laser guns. The mental cables encircling the laser axe signified all human minds bound to the will of the violence-wielding State through the Net.

The symbol was not unlike the primitive fasces. The only difference was that it had been updated to match the modern technology currently in use by the fascists. The old fasces had been used ad nauseum in the primitive government's symbology. Ironically ringing the base of the Statue of

"Freedom" on top of the Capitol Building. On the Senate Seal. In the Hall of the House of Representatives, displayed prominently behind whoever was speaking. On the Mercury dime. In Jean-Antoine Houdon's statue of George Washington, Washington had been resting his hand on the primitive fasces. And a plethora of other places. The primitive government had claimed to be a democracy, and yet its emblems had been rife with fascist symbolism. That tradition carried on in the Corporatist government which replaced it, which ironically referred to itself as a PLD—a "pluralistic liberal democracy."

All these holograms and medals had been planted here, unbeknownst to her, by the Reality Placers. The placers were Government Shadow Operatives who worked alongside Drake in the hidden wing of the DTM. Often, when fixers fixed people's memories, it was necessary for the placers to go to the citizen's home or workplace and plant false evidence that concorded with the new false memory. The false memory of her mother, ever devoted to the Saviors, given the high honor by them of being called on one of their infamous "top secret missions," and then dying on that secret mission, and receiving the highest medal of all, the Purple Mind Award. In reality, none of these top secret missions even existed. It was pure fabrication, created by the Saviors for whenever they needed a good cover-up memory.

After she had shown him all the medals, Drake eyed her response carefully while he said, "Your mother was an amazing person. I'm sorry she isn't here today."

"It's okay," Kristal replied. "I'm just glad she passed in a noble way." She appeared earnest, and heartbroken about her mother's passing, but proud of the honors bestowed upon her by the Saviors.

Was this woman really as orthodox as she sounded now, or was she just a good actor? Was she simply playing the part for the microphones planted all over the place, and the direct feed from her intphn? Most people in a Corporatist society such as this learned to internalize their slavery, to love it. But there were some that were simply very good at acting. Or at least Drake hoped that was the case. He would find out soon, once they were able to speak in private.

Drake knew from Kristal's file that she believed her mother, due to her loyalty to the GG, had been assigned a top-secret

mission, and had died during that mission, serving her Glorious Government. The work of another fixer. In reality, he knew, she had been condemned to…well, he preferred not to think about that.

Kristal motioned for Drake to sit down again. “Do you want something to drink? A TarC? Mountain Spew?”

“I’ll have a TarC, please.” He didn’t know how people could stomach that awful Mountain Spew.

“Sure. I’ll be right back.” Kristal disappeared into the kitchen.

Drake pulled out the shiny chrome cable. He eyed it, realizing that this physical stretch of metal was their only solace, their only refuge from the stifling, constant, overbearing eyes and ears of the Corporate Saviors. He put it back in his pocket.

She came back carrying a tray with two cans of TarC and two glasses full of ice. She opened one of the cans and poured some black liquid into a glass, offering it to Drake. He accepted and took a swig of the sweet, toxic liquid.

Kristal poured herself a glass, took a sip, and nervously laughed. “Would you like some Dinkies or Twing Twongs?”

Mmmm…sugary corporate snacks. When modern humans weren’t in the sims, they were inhaling sugar as if it were air. Dinkies were Drake’s personal favorite, but he didn’t want to look like too much of a chubby chunk on their first date. “I’ll pass, thanks.”

For a moment, there was an awkward silence.

Suddenly, Drake reached into his pocket and whipped out his shiny mental cable. “Shall we plug in?”

“Oh god!” she said, eying his cable. “I’ve never seen one so long!”

Drake had bought an extra long one in order to impress in case he ever had an occasion such as this. “There’s a first for everything,” he said and proceeded to attach the cable, first to his own xtphn; then, he leaned over and very deliberately pushed the end of his cable into her socket.

“Oh…delightful!” she giggled as the connector slid in. A rainbow of colorful lights began to pulsate along the cable. Datalight. They were connected. Data was now coursing between them like liquid gushing through a high pressure pipe.

Drake closed his eyes and focus-clicked on Imaginative Mentation from the Eyelid Menu. Then he selected “Invite Partner.” Two boxes appeared, giving him the option to start the session in the SimWorld Meadow, or in his own MindWorld Meadow. He focus-clicked the SimWorld Meadow.

Instantly, the apartment disappeared.

Instead of two chubby wubs sitting on a sofa, they were now two slim primitives standing in the Meadow, a gentle breeze stirring their clothes, the golden sun shining down on them from the azure sky. Drake’s muscular build was revealed through a primitive button-up blue shirt and dark grey slacks, and Kristal’s lithe form through a sheer pink summer dress that clung tantalizingly to her body in the wind.

Drake stared at Kristal. He couldn’t believe it. Holy fucking Christ. Of course, he had seen her on cerebralvision. But that primitive avatar had been soaked with artificial studio lighting and completely plastered with all that digital makeup they pile onto the Reality Mediators. And she had that stiff Reality Mediator expression, like “I’m better than you. Because I’m not a real person like you, I’m a fake robot that reads a teleprompter. Bow down to me.” The entire impression was overwhelmingly impersonal. Plastic. Unreal.

But now, seeing her up close, face-to-face, in her primitive form, for the first time, with no makeup and a natural, warm expression on her face, he was completely blown away. She looked a hundred times better than on cerebralvision. No. A thousand. Auburn hair, sky blue eyes, lightly freckled cheeks. Her luscious pink summer dress barely covered her now perfect, slender yet nubile physique. The décolletage exposed smooth, creamy white pinkish breasts. They weren’t quite as large as her mother’s primitive knockers had been, in the Reality Cube. Those had been ridiculously large, veritable watermelons. The breasts being flaunted in front of his face now were, in Drake’s opinion, perfectly sized. And below that, a skinny, barely there waist and perfectly shaped hips. The minuscule dress, flapping in the breeze, revealed long, sexy legs. And the dress was so short, it seemed that any moment it would reveal more. Finally, pink high-heeled sandals exposed diminutive toes with sparkling pink nail polish. God damn. He gulped. She was what the ancients would have called a knockout.

Drake knew that this perfect figure, this perfect face, this perfect everything that was in front of him now was exactly how she would look in real life if her body hadn't been destroyed by corporate food or corporate drinks like TarC. To create the primitive avatar, each citizen's xtphn utilized a technology known as MAPBOD: Multi-trillion Apex Polygonal Bodily Organic Delineation. That meant that in the simulation, she appeared exactly as she would in real life without corporate food. For every real problem the corporations caused, they created an artificial solution.

Drake didn't speak for a while, just taking in the sight.

Kristal had a huge smile on her face.

"So…what do you want to…do?"

Drake knew exactly what he wanted to do. But it was too soon. He finally peeled his face away from her perfect, primitive body, not wanting to come on too strong, but fearing that he already had. He noticed a squirrel scurrying by in the tall grass. Wait a minute…a squirrel? "We must be in your Meadow."

"How do you know?"

"Your Meadow's got bluegrass and gray squirrels. The SimWorld Meadow has astroturf and prairie dogs."

That's odd, he thought. Normally when two people start Imaginative Mentation together, they start either in the SimWorld Meadow, or in the MindWorld of the person who made the invitation. Not in the invitee's Meadow! But there were rare times when the invitee had a stronger psyche, and they started instead in their MindWorld, which is what happened now. Weird.

Kristal laughed. "Oh, yeah, that's right. I almost forgot about that. Well, I always did like squirrels. Like my little friend."

"I remember. You kind of do remind me of a squirrel."

Kristal feigned mock anger. "What?? You think I'm a furry little creature that likes nuts?"

"Yeah, I do actually," Drake said, playfully.

"Hey!" she complained, play-shoving him.

His curiosity about her psychic structure and abilities—which he surely was interested in—gave him the perfect cover for his other motive. Both required the Hacking Tools. "Hey, I wanna show you a cool app I downloaded the other day."

"Okay! Let's see it."

He mentated a row of icons in front of him, scrolled through them, and then flicked one at her. It resembled a red and green dartboard. "Here, open this."

She caught the dartboard icon. After a moment, there was a faint chime. The dartboard disappeared. Then she said "Okay. I opened it. Nothing happened."

Drake paused for a moment. He looked like he was holding himself back. A slight smile curled up at the corner of his mouth.

"Now we can say and do anything, and our Corporate Saviors won't know anything about it."

Kristal was silent for a moment. Thinking.

Then, her eyes wide…"Really?!"

"Really." Drake nodded.

"Really really?"

All the sudden, she seemed as giddy as a schoolgirl. Someone who truly loved their government and Corporate Saviors would have flown into a fit of rage at the thought of betraying them. So all that blustering about the Corporate Saviors and her mother's top secret mission must have been for the Cloud, the AI that monitors all the thoughts and conversations of all citizens 24/7.

She came up close to his face, her crystalline blue eyes staring into his. But then she blushed and turned away. Seems she, too, was thinking about…something. Better switch the subject so as not to scare away my little squirrel.

"Wanna see something I mentated recently?" He said.

"Sure! Why not?"

Drake concentrated. Suddenly a bizarre flying machine popped into existence, resting a few yards in front of them in the bluegrass. All bronze, glistening gears, bolts, levers, chains and pedals, with two large, leathery wings, like the wings of a gigantic bat, it looked like something some mad Victorian engineer had made after consulting Leonardo DaVinci's designs for a flying machine.

"Wow, you really created this all by yourself?"

"Well, I came up with the basic key elements and fed those to my AI assistant. But afterwards I went through and made painstaking tweaks and adjustments to almost everything. So

we could say I practically created it myself. At least, I like to think of it that way. Shall we get in?"

Drake's clockpunk aircraft had two seats, each equipped with pedals. Drake helped Kristal into her seat, feeling quite the gentleman, and then strode over to the other side and got in.

"Wait," she said. "We should have different outfits on for this. May I?"

Drake shrugged. "Whatever floats your DaVincian flying machine. Do you have something already…in mind?" That phrase "in mind" had become something of a pun in modern society, which could refer both to an idea someone has, or to a virtual creation someone had already mentated and saved on their intphn, and thus stored, in a fashion, in their mind, ready for use at the spur of the moment.

"No, not really. I'll just make something up on the fly."

Kristal concentrated for a moment, and suddenly, she had on a charming pink Victorian dress, adorned in white lace, and a pink ribbon tied around her neck. She looked at her dress and concentrated a little bit more, and soon the white lace started disappearing and reappearing all over the dress, forming fractal patterns. Then, she mentated once more, and on her head, she wore a pink and white French maid's bonnet.

Then she turned her attention towards Drake. Suddenly his attire changed. He was now wearing a black Victorian suit, gold waistcoat, and burgundy cravat. Kristal concentrated and presently the suit was covered with circles of several different colors that bounced around like billiard balls, crashing into each other, whilst simultaneously sending out waves of concentric circles of competing colors. Then she looked at his head and mentated. A black top hat appeared. "Wait, one last finishing touch," she said, and added a miniature nineteenth century locomotive that chugged around in a circle on the brim of his hat.

Drake looked at her dress, and then down at his own clothing, stunned. Everything was of superb quality, and incredibly detailed. As if someone had mentated for hours designing them. Impressive, he thought. She's good.

They started pedaling. They were now moving forward, riding the bluegrass. The giant bat wings started flapping, and

flapping…and soon they were up in the air. Presently Kristal's Meadow started getting smaller and smaller. He could see her Forest of Memories in the background. Drake mentated, and suddenly they were above the River Thames. There was fog all around them. But Drake concentrated once more, and suddenly the fog dissipated and it was a sunny day in London.

They kept pedaling, gaining altitude as they went. Soon, they flew past Big Ben, and Drake felt like he could almost reach out and touch the hands on the huge clock. Below, thousands of avatars milled about on the sidewalk. Other denizens of this simulated place. They were no longer in Kristal's private MindWorld, but in the heavily populated SimWorld. But, with the help of the Hacking Tools, nobody could see them, including the Corporate Saviors and their pesky, spying AI. They were all alone, invisible to everyone, thanks to the Hacking Tool he had thrown at Kristal, Private MindLink.

Kristal was looking down, marveling at the people and places below them. Presently they were flying over Buckingham Palace. "Monarchy," Drake noted. "What a quaint idea. The Corporations are so much more advanced. I imagine the ancient kings would have killed to have had the ability to read minds. Well, they killed to do everything they did, but they would have slaughtered unimaginable numbers to have that ability."

"Is it really true what you said?"

"Is what true?"

"I mean…are you for real that the Corporate Saviors can't read our minds or see us or listen in on us now?"

God, she looked so dazzling in her Victorian dress.

"It's for real." Then he was silent for a moment, thinking. He had to be careful not to say too much. He had just met this woman. He needed to tread lightly, not get either of them into any trouble. But his brain was racing at lightspeed and his heart fluttering. He wanted to tell her everything. Though he knew they were invisible, he wanted to mentate away all these crowds and all this fanfare and go some place private and try things he had never tried before. But he knew that he had to breach the subject carefully.

He had spent his whole life knowing that the government

was a lie, that their Asexual Pride and Science classes were all bogus. He had known all that time that the corporate citizens were just slaves. But until now, he had never met any other living soul which he felt he could trust with that knowledge.

It was strange how they had started off in her MindWorld. But at least there were no percept glitches so far. Being exposed to those was potentially dangerous to one's long term sanity, which he knew from sad experience. His father had contracted Percept Glitch Syndrome from using a prototype of a different kind of intphn, with more neuronal-electronic connections than the standard model, claimed to be much faster and more efficient. The government had promised there would be no long term side effects. But then his father had found out that the government purposefully introduced "experimental" features into some of the units in order to test their effects. As a result, his father's perception of real reality had been permanently impaired, and he had ended up going through life with people randomly popping into and out of existence, appearing upside down, or even inside out, their heads suddenly severed and floating in the air above them while talking to him, objects around him disappearing or reappearing, changing all the time randomly…and it had driven him mad. And then, they had done what they had done to him. To keep him silent. Apparently they had purposefully targeted him to test out Percept Glitch Syndrome on because he had been talking to people about getting out of the Corporate Zone. They had given him a choice—be painlessly ended, or be the test subject of our new experimental hardware. And Drake had vowed revenge on those who had done this to him, the Corporate Saviors. They had used him as a guinea pig for their sick and twisted experiment, broken his mind, and then gotten rid of him to clean up their mess.

They were making a wide arc in the sky. The sun was high above them, meaning it was about noon here in this place. They had passed Scotland Yard, and now they were flying right past Cleopatra's Needle. Suddenly, the clouds started moving at hyperspeed, and the sun blazed rapidly across the sky. In the blink of an eye, the glowing orb had already begun to set. Despite the unnatural speed of the heavens above, the people below continued to move at normal speed. The rippling surface of the Thames now reflected the golden sky above.

She must have done that, Drake thought. Wasn't me.

The massive obelisk was bathed in the warm glow of the sunset. Drake mused. Cleopatra's Needle, the ancient monolith stolen by the English monarchy from Egypt. The damn hypocrites. So much virtue-signaling, so much barefaced doubletalk. If they really had been against "white supremacy," as they had virtue-signalled about back before the monarchy, along with the United Kingdom, were dissolved so Britain could be absorbed into the New European Union, why didn't they put their money where their mouth was? Why didn't they return all the ancient relics they had stolen from the peoples of other lands, like this thousands of years old monument, and all those jewels and artifacts plundered from India? Besides, what could epitomize white supremacy more than a bunch of dark-skinned immigrants being forced to bow down to an English king? White supremacy, indeed. What a joke. The real supremacy in every era had been of the government and the oligarchy against the people. The monopoly of violence against the vulnerable masses. And they had never apologized or made up for that.

"Wanna see something I created?" Kristal said.

"Go right ahead." Drake nodded.

Kristal mentated and suddenly they were in Florence. Then she pointed. Over there! Drake veered the aircraft and soon they were flying low over a beautiful palace with an exquisite fountain in front of it.

"Wow! You created that?"

Kristal nodded.

"Let's take her down so I can get a better look at it."

They landed Drake's clockpunk aircraft and got out.

Drake was stunned, standing there, staring at the illustrious fountain. In the center there were several statues, all in Renaissance style. Sea gods, mermaids, aquatic monsters, all locked in the throes of battle or in some kind of religious ecstasy. The dynamic scene looked like something straight out of greek mythology. And the craftsmanship…it was exquisite. He didn't recognize this fountain from any of his prior visits to SimWorld, nor any of the many documentaries he had watched about Europe. It must have really been a brand new one she had created. "This is…incredible!" He breathed.

"Thanks," Kristal beamed.

"How difficult was it to word everything exactly the right way to get it to do this?" He knew crafting the right prompts was the key to AI creation. Garbage in, garbage out. Creativity in, beauty out.

"Huh? Oh, you mean the AI Assistant? I didn't use one. I created this all myself, straight out of my head."

Wow. Drake was blown away. She had serious talent. First the intricate clothes they were wearing, and now this. Now Drake felt sheepish. It had taken him hours to create the clockpunk aircraft, and he had needed AI assistance the whole time. Imagine creating something this exquisite straight out of one's head. And they hadn't even gone inside the palace yet. Of course, his main art wasn't this SimWorld stuff. This was mainly for amateurs and hobbyists. He was a much better artist as a professional, as a fixer, creating memories. But still...

"Yeah, I create everything all by myself, from my own imagination. I don't really like those AI assistants, having to describe to them what I want, word it exactly the right way, and even then I don't get what I want. The only way to truly get what you want—exactly what you want—is to make it yourself. Of course, I did watch lots and lots of documentaries on Renaissance art on the cerebralvision, and made several visits to SimEurope, and visited similar creations by other mental artists. It's not like I'm a genius or anything. I'm just someone who likes drawing inspiration from the world around me and imagining my own version of it."

Still, Drake thought, though the statues and fountain resembled others he had seen, they also had their own unique spunk, their own flair. He doubted someone else could make a fountain exactly like it. The girl had a unique mind. A unique creativity. She was a fellow artiste.

He was about to suggest that they take a look inside the palace when suddenly, the fountain, the palace, all of Florence, even their fancy outfits disappeared, and they were back, standing in the middle of the Meadow, wearing the clothes they had been wearing before, Drake in his blue button-up shirt, and Kristal in that short pink dress showing off her long, sexy legs....

Ferrets scampered by in the clovers underfoot.

Wait, this isn't her Meadow…

"Wha– but–" Drake stammered. But how was this possible? This wasn't how mentation worked. While in Imaginative Mentation together, either person could mentate and create, popping things into existence as well as teleporting them to any place available in the SimWorld. The SimWorld was the hub. All MindWorlds were connected together, through the Net, to the SimWorld.

But for someone to enter your own personal MindWorld, they had to be invited. They couldn't just barge into your MindWorld. That was akin to barging into someone's thoughts. Only the Corporate Saviors, their damned AI, and the Thought Scrapers could do that.

"Um…why are we in my Meadow?" Drake put forward. I should ask ***how***, he thought.

"Because it's a much funner way to get to know you than just playing silly games and flying around in SimWorld together. Now we're in your mind." She giggled. Then she started running towards the nearby line of trees.

He started out after her. "Wait!"

"Come on!" Kristal said. She was running even faster now. She darted into the forest. As he got closer, he recognized these trees…

"Wait!" She was running into his…

Drake now ran full speed ahead, trying to catch up with her. He plunged into the forest…***his*** forest…his Forest of Memories. The repository of all the memories from throughout his life. As he ran between the trees, batting stray branches out of his way, he started seeing them. His memories.

His Govly-Maker teaching him a lesson at Govly Academy while he watched in idle boredness waiting for class to be over. Making his first and only friend at Govly Academy, who had moved after graduating and he had never seen since. A boy bullying him between classes. His father showing him a hologram of his mother, who died while he was still at the Academy, before he could meet her. Mentists he had worked with. Patients he had cured. All were wearing their primitive avatars.

Finally, after several frantic minutes, running by memories, by people long forgotten, he found her, in a small clearing, lying

in a pile of leaves, flapping her arms and legs as if she were making a snow angel, giggling in ecstasy.

He stopped and put his hands on his knees as he caught his breath. Yes, their virtual bodies had limits. These worlds were programmed not only to have precisely accurate primitive bodies using MAPBOD technology, but also to have realistic, realworld physics. Their virtual bodies were subjected to the laws of chemistry and physics, and could tire out just like a real body. After running through this forest, stirring up all those old memories, he was virtu-physically and emotionally exhausted.

Finally, he approached her and sat down in the leaves. "What are you doing?"

What had she seen? What did she now know about him?

"And why did you come here? You can't just enter someone's MindWorld, you know. You're supposed to ask—"

"Now I know...everything!" She suddenly exclaimed.

Everything? What was she talking about? She may have seen some things from his memory, running through this forest —that much was true. But it was impossible for her to know ***everything***. The minutes he had been chasing her would only have been enough for her to barely scratch the surface of his memories. He had a lifetime of them, after all. With his Reality Cube, he had been inside her mind, had seen her memories. But even with full access like that, his time had been limited. He only had a short time to scan through an entire LifeLine. If he had wanted to know everything about her, he could have spent weeks and only seen the tip of the iceberg. And her, running around here in his Forest, it was nothing.

But it was strange how she'd been able to transport them here in the first place. That's not the way things worked. True, the xtphn was a cerebral interface. Brain and machine. Now forming one whole. And the ultrahigh bandwidth mental cable turned it into a multi-cerebral interface. Two brains and one machine. Now all three formed a new whole. Two brains, physically connected. A scary thought, if you think about it. In the early days, such devices were ridden with problems, causing all sorts of trauma to the brain. The human brain wasn't designed to be directly connected in such a way to another brain. Early testers of such devices often went crazy, their brains destroyed by the sudden onrush of alien data.

Therefore, several layers of hardware and software protective barriers had been built into later models, like an onion skin. This was one of the main differences between MindLink, the first successful digital cerebral interface, and earlier, failed attempts. With today's systems, it was impossible for a user to simply cross the threshold and enter another user's brain. Except of course, for exceptions such as Reality Fixers with their advanced hardware. The xtphns and intphns were built with backdoors to allow them access.

But two citizens, simply using their xtphns to mentate together, were safe. They could only access the areas of each other's brains which they granted the other permission to access. They met together in the machine, in the sim, and usually spent the whole time on neutral ground, inside the sim, not inside each other's brains, only giving access rarely when they wanted to. And even that was usually frowned upon. Mentating together in SimWorld was the recommended way to MindLink. But somehow, this woman had breached those rules, breached those physical limits. Damn it! He should have been more careful. He should have seen the signs. She had already broken through once, in his Reality Cube. But he had forgotten about that, excited about the prospects of learning more about this unique woman. About the possibility of working together to bring down the Corporate Saviors. And of doing other things together as well. Other increasingly ***tempting*** things… But desire is a double-edged sword. Let one be careful, lest he forget that when he picks up one edge of the blade, he picks up the other as well…

"What exactly do you mean when you say ***everything***?"

"I mean, silly, that I know everything about you now. All your memories, your life, everything!" As she laughed, she threw leaves up in the air.

"But how is that possible?"

As Kristal lay there in the leaves, her revealing dress had ridden up higher. He could see quite a bit of those milky white thighs now.

"I don't know. But when I MindLink with people, for some reason I can just cross right through into them. For me, it's as if there is no barrier between our minds."

No barrier? Barring the use of experimental programs like

Brain Meld, whenever two consciousnesses met and touched through the MindLink, there was still always a clear delineation between the two individuals. And Brain Meld was so chaotic and haphazard, it wasn't much use to someone looking merely to read another person's mind. They usually didn't retain enough control over their own mind to even think straight. And so, up until now, people had been safe from others invading their mind. Except of course for the government and the Saviors. The government and its owners could invade every citizen's mind at will, but normal people couldn't invade a single mind. Ever. That's how slavery worked. All power in society centralized into the hands of a few megalomaniacs.

Kristal continued, "And I can just download everything, and it all ends up right here." She pointed to her head. "So, I have all of your memories up until this moment in time. How your father died. How you hate the government. How you wish you could kill the Corporate Saviors. How your uncle abandoned you, after giving you the Hacking Tools. Thanks, by the way, for that nifty little set of tools. Now I've made a copy of the whole suite for myself and saved it to my intphn."

What? How had she done that? Downloaded his memories? How would that even be possible? Nothing made any sense anymore.

Suddenly he noticed she was looking at him differently now, like no other woman had ever looked at him. She wasn't thinking about Hacking Tools, or even about his memories which she had apparently hijacked. She was looking at him the way a corporate kid looks at a McTriple Bypass Burger.

"So, Drake…what shall we do now? Nobody's watching us. Not the AI, not the Corporate Saviors…nobody. We are free to do ***whatever*** we want. Nobody'll catch us in here. We can do anything! Anything at all!" She threw up some more leaves and laughed, her skirt riding higher and higher as she played around gaily in the leaves. Her eyes sparkled with intense mischievousness.

Drake said nothing, only stared into her eyes. He couldn't believe it. She had stolen all of his memories. Now he was in an extremely dangerous position, with this woman knowing everything about him. She could destroy him if she wanted to.

Had he made a grave mistake, in deciding he could trust her, going off little more than a whim? He had wanted to feed

her a little bit at a time, gain her trust, win her over to his cause. They could have been allies. But now, he didn't know what to think of her. She had simply taken everything, in the blink of an eye, without asking permission, without warning. What was he getting himself—what ***had*** he gotten himself into?

Kristal now reached down and grabbed her dress and pulled it up over her curvaceous, primitive body, all the way up over her head. She had on nothing underneath.

Nothing at all.

She was now completely naked, lying in a pile of leaves. She caressed herself, grabbed her sensational breasts, tilted her head back, made a small ecstatic sound.

Then she looked him in the eyes.

"Now, make love to me."

MEDIATOR'S MEMORIES: THE VENDITOR

My name is Kristal Silverberg. In my mind, I hold the memories of many people. Here is one of them...

Vr. Carditis sat in his office. There was a guy, average weight, let's say 350 pounds, with a red beard and a navy blue baseball cap going on and on about his problems with indigestion.

In the ancient days, venditors had been called "doctors," the Latin word for teacher. But once everyone realized that they never taught anybody anything, they changed the title to "venditor," the Latin for salesman, since what they truly were was not teachers at all, but salesmen for the corporation MagicPillCo. They didn't teach people how to take care of their bodies. They just sold them pills and racked up money for the Corporate Savior who owned a monopoly over pharmaceutical products.

Part of the ***mentists'*** job, on the other hand, was actually teaching people. Teaching them the holy indoctrination of the Glorious Government was part of the mentist's duties, along with removing their ungovly memories. So mentists kept the title "Doctor."

If teaching people how to be healthy had anything to do with the venditors' profession, they could teach people how to prevent illness by proper sleep, exercise, and eating healthy foods. But no, they just let their customers get ill (more profit for the salesman) and then sold the customer the magic pill, which by the way never cured the illness or the underlying causes, but rather simply "managed symptoms," which allowed for repeat sales for the rest of the customer's (probably relatively short) life. Cha-ching. Money, baby. This is a business. Did you think we wanted to teach you how to be healthy so that you never need to come see us ever again, and we never make any money? If that's what you thought, you're a moron.

These were the venditor's thoughts as the customer kept blabbing about unrelated crap like his lifestyle choices and what he had been doing before these symptoms appeared. God, I hate it when customers go off like this, he thought, as he

adjusted the gleaming gold nameplate on his desk emblazoned with the words "Vr. Perry Carditis." Just shut up and let me sell you some Magic Pills and make the Corporations richer.

"Do you think it would help if I changed my diet?" the customer with the red beard was saying.

Customers, for some strange reason, had been called in ancient days "patients." Why? It's us venditors who need patience, listening to our customers blab away like this. Change his diet? Is he crazy? Is he referring to that Conspiracy Theory about treating causes rather than symptoms? Changing your lifestyle instead of taking some Magic Pills? Does he think the corporations' pills aren't a silver bullet that cures all? Vr. Carditis had learned in Medical Academy that you always treat symptoms, ***not*** root causes. Only wackos who question the corporations criticize Western Medicine and think you should treat the root cause of disease through diet, exercise, and sleep. And as everyone knows, our healthcare system in Western countries is perfect, that's why people in modern first-world Western countries are so healthy! The healthiest people in the history of the earth, in fact! The proof is in the pudding. Well, literally in many cases. Mmmm... FattyChemCo pudding is so delicious...but the venditors thoughts were wandering... Stay focused! I need a fat paycheck so I can keep dining on synthetic lobster! Concentrate on my job. And the job of a venditor is sell, sell, sell! Doesn't matter if the patient needs it. Doesn't matter if it will make the patient's health worse. I'm a salesman. All that matters is the bottom line.

"Josh..." the venditor started.

"My name is Jon. Jon the trucker."

"Jon, then. The way we treat symptoms—erh, I mean health problems—is not by changing this so called 'diet.' You have your Corporate Saviors and their delicious food, have you not? Are you a Conspiracy Theorist? Do you think your Corporate Saviors would supply you with food that isn't good for you? That would be insanity!"

"I, uhm...no. I ain't no Conspiracist thing-a-majiggee."

"Look, this is probably caused by stress working the autoconstruction job."

"I drive a hover-truck for the GG."

"Oh, that's right. Anyways, none of this matters, because in corporate medicine the solution to every problem is always the same. A magic pill that makes MagicPillCo richer! Erhh, I mean, makes you healthier, of course. Ours is a one-size-fits-all profession. So anyways, since I don't need to understand your situation or make any lifestyle recommendations other than to keep shoveling that Corporate Manna down your face, all of these silly questions and details you are giving me don't matter, and I've already billed you for MagicPillCo's Magic Pill #536, Zylomotrilpheniltrin, and the admincredits have already been deducted from your account. The cure is taking those pills for the rest of your life so you can eternally manage symptoms." The venditor stood up, hiding the needle behind his back. He walked slowly towards the patient. "The admincredits will be deducted automatically every month. You can pick up the first batch of pills on your way out." Suddenly, he plunged the needle into the patient's arm.

"Oww! What was that for?

"My records show you haven't had your biweekly booster for over two months! Thank Government for MagicPillCo's injections! The nurse in the hall will get you a bandage for that."

Jon the trucker held the tiny puncture wound as he closed his eyes. "Looks like they deducted the admincreds already. Okay, thanks venditor, for curing my malady!" He got up to leave.

"Please, call me Perry. One more thing…drop your pants."

"What?! Why?"

"I need to check for a hernia. It is the one thing we venditors do well, besides selling pills."

"Oh. That's right." The customer unzipped his fly.

"Now just relax," Vr. Carditis said as he reached for the customer's testes, a gleam in his eye.

CHAPTER 8: THE CORPORATE SAVIOR

Ronald K. Wolfe, Corporate Saving Officer of FattyChemCo, the world's foremost industrial producer of chemically-enriched, healthy, life-saving corporate food, sat on the nanoporcelain toilet in the middle of an enormous bathroom, deep under the earth in his megabunker, surrounded by his slaves, all of whom where female, all of them naked, all nineteen years old, and all ravishingly beautiful, selected from before birth from the general population using algorithms that predicted future phenotype using genetic beauty markers. Never allowed to eat his company's corporate food, having been fed only natural food since birth, forbidden from ever wearing any clothing, none had so much as an excess pound on their nude, supple bodies.

Wolfe's body was the epitome of masculine perfection as he sat naked on the gleaming white porcelain throne. Eight-pack. Legs like tree trunks. Rock-hard, gigantic biceps. Herculean chest and shoulders. Two percent body-fat. Deep bronze tan. Lush full head of platinum hair. Emerald-green eyes. Intense, scowling eyebrows. Chiseled features of a god. His cock was hard as a rock, as it always was during his morning routine, ready to launch a full frontal assault on the day. At age sixty-two, he was more virile than all of the blubber-bellied inhabitants of the Corporate Zone put together.

This bathroom, one of many in his bunker, sported extravagant baroque styling and a gigantic whirlpool bath surrounded by four Corinthian columns. Wolfe's eyes scanned a digital page of ***Fantastic Voyage*** by Ray Kurzweil. He was doing his morning reading the old-fashioned way—on a tablet. A slave girl with clear mocha skin, gigantic breasts with small dark nipples, and long, luscious dark hair to her exquisite ass—which reminded him of a thoroughbred mare—stood behind the toilet, Flowbee-ing his flaxen hair.

Wolfe was more than a tycoon. More than a ruler.

He was a Savior.

And not just any Savior. He was the best Savior.

Saving mankind from their own incompetence, laziness, and stupidity, while saving the other Corporate Saviors from their constant fuckups. The only reason the fatass citizens were alive was because his autofactories created their chemical-ladened, processed, obesenating, holy manna. And the only reason the subjugation of mankind through Thought

Management Technology had been so successful was because of Wolfe, his innate ability to control people, and his unending masculine drive for domination.

Mankind had evolved from beings capable of forging the wilderness and taming the soil a scant two hundred years ago into a weak, feeble-minded creature barely able to wipe its own ass, its brain frying in virtual worlds all day, lacking any grip on reality. Without Savior Wolfe and the free handouts from his autofactories, the pathetic little blobs would all die within a couple weeks. No, make that days.

The bathroom all around Wolfe was a writhing, oozing, sticky scene of nirl-on-nirl action. The soft chorus of moans all around him were music to his ears. He referred to his slaves as "nirls," since all of them were nude all the time, and all of them were girls. Why hadn't anybody thought to call nude girls nirls before? Was he the only human who could think up anything? In every direction he looked, his eyes feasted on naked, slippery, sweating nirls engaging in lesbian acts, emitting little erotic whines and sighs of glee. Pairs, threesomes, fivesomes. Kissing. Fingering. Sucking. Right in front of him, a group of four were all focused on one nirl, kissing her, teasing her, sucking her cunt, biting, pulling on her rock-hard nipples. It was impossible to concentrate in the morning without mass numbers of horny females engaging in sexual acts with each other, gorging his eyes with vistas of female carnality.

The Slave-Rearing Factory—a specialized hidden bunker—prepared the girls from birth to later serve their role as slaves to the Corporate Saviors. The nirls were highly trained courtesans, chefs, Flowbee artists, manicurists, and psychologists. They had been strictly lesbians before being transferred to his bunker, no other man allowed to touch them.

Two of his nirls knelt before him, a blonde with blue eyes and freckles, and an exotic mix of Asian and African. The mix's slightly slanted dark eyes looked up at Wolfe as her full, soft, gelatinous lips fellated his rod, her head bobbing up and down, while the blonde, her blue eyes looking directly into Wolfe's, devotedly serviced his testicles, slathering them messily with her mouthjuice.

A petite nirl with red hair gave his left hand a manicure, as he read from the tablet in his right. To his right, a Euro-African

with genetically engineered purple eyes, lightly-freckled cheeks, and a large, loose Afro, sat ready to swipe the pages for him.

His morning retinue of slaves included the swipers and wipers, the suckers and fuckers. He divided them into groups according to how well he liked their performance in a variety of key categories, such as swallowing or spitting, cock-spinning (where the girl sat on his dong and spun around in a circle), wiping his ass, turning the pages on his primordial tablet, and of course, the most important, Flowbee-ing his hair.

Ah, the Flowbee. That wondrous piece of tech developed by a brilliant primitive man in California in the 1980s, which obviated traditional haircutting by sucking the hair up into a vacuum tube and chopping it off with precision razors. Modern Flowbees, utilizing advanced AI, were now capable of thousands of different layered cuts…plus, by analyzing factors such as the shape of the skull, facial features, and hairline, they were able to create the perfect haircut customized to the individual. Savior Wolfe had his glorious platinum hair Flowbeed every day, sometimes several times a day.

"Turn the page," Wolfe ordered the nirl. She obediently swiped the screen.

Damn it, he thought. What is wrong with this world? Why can't everything be perfect, the way I envision it? I need to go back to reading books on my eyelids, instead of this old-timey tablet crap. But then I can't watch my slaves giving me head out of the corner of my eye, he mused as he glanced at the blonde with the freckles whose soft, warm, pink mouth was enveloping one of his testicles.

We just need to develop tech to read books floating in the air, superimposed over reality. I already told Bobby Doors at TinyLimp to fix that. TinyLimp developed the software for ASFs—Augmented Sightfeeds. Mixing real and virtual images. But due to sloppy coding, if you opened your eyes while viewing an ASF, everything became washed out and almost transparent, competing with the real light flooding in. That's why you needed to close your eyes to see the Eyelid Menu.

Holojectors, on the other hand, could throw holograms just about anywhere, from almost any distance, but when projected more than a few inches away from the holojector,

they were too jittery and out of focus for up close scrutiny, such as was necessary when reading. You could project a UFO in the sky, and it would look totally realistic from afar. Better than the real thing. But put your eyes a few inches from it, and try to look at minute details, and what looked amazing from far away all the sudden dissolved into a blurry mess.

God, I feel like a caveman! I'm living with a bunch of idiots! That's why technology is so limited and archaic compared to the potential which I envision for it! He felt like his ideas were better than any of the other Corporate Saviors, but alas, he couldn't be everywhere at once. Besides running FattyChemCo, he was still practically running the Department of Thought Management by himself. He was playing two extremely vital roles—fattening up the dumb cattle and controlling their thoughts—because nobody else could do them right. He felt like he was carrying the weight of the world on his shoulders alone, the last truly visionary man, while all the other Saviors were a bunch of nincompoops who had inherited their positions, and didn't know the first thing about how to lead humanity forth into the Golden Era of technological slavery.

If Bob won't fix his shitty software, then I'll just need to get a camera installed in my forehead which will send the videofeed to my eyelid screen, so I can have a window on the right side with my book, and then another on the left showing a good view of my slaves giving me head.

Then another thought struck him. I guess I could just keep one eye open and the other shut. But he immediately rejected that idea. That seemed so low-tech and awkward. Aw, fuck it. "Turn the page." He had finished reading another page while simultaneously cerebrating over all these crucial thoughts.

To the bustacious mocha-colored nirl behind him, "Send in another slave to caress my chest. And tell her to look like she's enjoying it."

"Yes, my Corporateness," The busty slave replied. Within moments, yet another nirl—a Chinese with blue eyes—came in and started rubbing his chest as she oohed and awwed.

When his nirls turned twenty, they were no longer of any use to him, and he threw them to their death in a spectacular ritual. God, he loved being a Savior.

Then it hit him like a ton of bricks. There was another option, another way it could be done! I could have a long mechanical arm installed which reaches all the way from the wall to the toilet with a small holojector on the end. The arm would not only cut down on oscillation, but the projected screen would be close enough to the holojecter to remain in sharp focus.

Wolfe was pulled out of his musings as the mixed slave slurped and sucked his manhood even more seductively, sliding up and down from balls to tip. The blonde was no less passionate, and she had begun licking the other side of his shaft, sometimes licking the mixed's tongue, sometimes kissing her jellolike lips. They were making out with each other with his sausage in the middle. Both of them were competing for his balls, grabbing them and squeezing them lovingly.

Anyways, as I was thinking, this bathroom is larger than an entire lardass apt, and the toilet is right in the middle, so the mechanical arm would have to be fairly long indeed…

Oooh! Aahhh… Come on, let me have my creative breakthrough…

The mixed nirl had gotten all worked up and had stolen his dong from the blonde, hijacking it for herself. Her rosy cheeks were flushed as she sucked and sucked. She had begun slamming her head forcefully onto it, balls deep, gagging on it, as if trying desperately to imbibe his rod all the way down through her throat and into her stomach.

He couldn't take it anymore.

He needed to have his juices inside her nirlwomb.

He dropped the tablet and its low-tech glass shattered to a million pieces on the marble floor. Then he grabbed her by the hair and yanked her off his dick, pulling her up into standing position and turning her around in the process. Ah…there you are, my lovely little thing. Perfect, round, succulent ass cheeks. Flushed with red. He stuck his face in her ass, licking and biting all that redness. Then he grabbed her hips and forced her down onto his long erection. The labia minora were wet, parted, ready for him. He began the long slide in. Aahhh… Yes… He kept pushing the ass down, a look of ecstasy on his face. Holy shit, this one is definitely a virgin. Finally, he had pushed all the way down until the gloriously tight vulva had drunk in

his long cock all the way to the base.

"Now work your ass! Do what you're paid for, bitch!" Wolfe snarled.

Shyly at first, she started bobbing her mixed piece of nirlbutt up and down. But then he smacked her ass and she increased the pace. The rhythm of her ass was mesmerizing, hypnotizing, massaging his hard meat.

Oh, god yes.

"Come on, keep going. Move that ass, damn it!" He smacked the ass again.

She began slamming up and down, slapping her ass cheeks on him, squishing his balls, dancing on his pole, fucking it like her life depended on it. Which it did. The blonde got to her feet and started soul-sucking the Afro-Asian mix's mouth, while she kneaded Wolfe's balls with her hand. The buxom slave who had been Flowbee-ing his hair set down her Flowbee and walked around to his front and started waiving her funbags in Wolfe's face and he began to motorboat them. The chest-rubber started licking his chest, and the page-turner and manicure slave started making out with each other while rubbing his biceps and chest. All six nirls began moaning loudly, egging the lesbian orgy all around them on to moan even louder and fuck each other ever more passionately. The room became an uncontrollable, raging cacophony of female euphoria, full of steam, sweat, and nirljuice.

Just then, an annoying bing-bong sound started playing in his head. God damn it! He closed his eyes. The caller ID showed that it was Jerry the pudgy eunuch, his personal assistant. Damn you, Jerry, hang up! But it kept ringing. He focus-clicked "ANSWER - AUDIO ONLY" from his Eyelid Menu.

"Your Corporateness, Jerry here. Can we do a visual call?" He heard the voice inside his head. Electrons traveling from his intphn to his cerebral cortex.

"God damn it, Jerry, I'm doing my morning routine! Just audio. And make it quick!"

He fondled and squeezed the perfect piece of ass in front of him, as it kept sliding up and down on his dick.

"But sir, this seemed quite important."

"I'm balls deep and close to my third orgasm. Plus I've got a couple more shits coming down the pipeline. I don't want to

see your ugly mug right now, Jerry. Now spit it out, god dammit!"

"Okay, okay. It's about that mediator, Silverberg. As we expected, she seems to have incredibly well-developed regenerative powers. Meaning, as you know, that her memories come back up from the unconscious, as they do from time to time in normal citizens, but in her to an even greater extent—"

"God damn it, Jerry, I know all this. Cut to the chase! Oooh..." He was on the edge of orgasm. Oh god, make it quick, Jerry.

"Yes, yes. Well, as you also know, seems she has somehow been appropriating other people's memories. We were watching the situation develop, waiting, collecting information on how this works. But now...she seems to have appropriated some new memories, only these ones are quite different. How can I put this? Hmmm... They appear to be the memories of... her Reality Fixer. I haven't got the full details yet, but this is exceptional. I think you should have a look at her yourself, your Saviorship."

"Oohh...okay, okay, fine, just put her on the schedule. Hey Jerry, I'll call you back later." Wolfe hung up. What the fuck? The memories of her Reality Fixer? You mean—? Never mind, I'm about to squirt. Ah shit...

The two rosy ass cheeks kept working his pole. Unngghhh... So red. As he kept smacking them, they kept getting redder and redder, while inside, the tight virgin vulva kept getting wetter and wetter. The firm, slippery pussy walls were squeezing, loving his cock. She kept going, kept dancing...

Suddenly a piercing female scream reverberated throughout the bathroom, and the mixed nirl's body flew into a fit of spasmodic convulsions, her red ass cheeks bobbing up and down all over the place. And then, all at once...

Mount St. Helens erupted.

Ooohhhh, goooddd...

His dick spewed forth massive amounts of cum into her womb. He pulled her waist down hard, forcing her twitching body onto his pole.

Aaaahhhh....

The eruption of cum kept going for at least a minute. Mount

St. Helens was a nickname given his cock by one of his nirls, so forcefully and violently did his semen explode. He sat there grunting for several minutes. Relaxed bliss, his eyes just two slits of contentedness. The nirl sat there patiently on her lord as her belly drank in the semen.

Suddenly, his eyes snapped open. All the intensity of his eyebrows was back, and the day cowered before them.

"Okay, everybody up!" He motioned with his hands. The perfect ass slid up off his boner. His dick was clean. Her womb had licked all the cum off. All the nirls stood at attention. "I have a long day; I need to get started. Wiper," he said, referring to the mocha-colored booby nirl. "Start wiping." She was the best wiper. Always got everything spic and span. He would miss her after he had to kill her. "The others, get my clothes ready."

His slaves deferentially obeyed, disappearing into the adjoining room. After his ass was clean as a whistle, Wolfe and the mocha nirl moved along into an exceedingly large and finely crafted dressing room, where the nirls had already begun preparing his wardrobe. The room was stocked with multiple spacious walk-in closets, full-length mirrors, an enormous vanity, and of course, dozens of passionately fucking lesbians.

The room said, "Incoming holocall. Accept?"

"Who's it from?"

"Savior Viktimstein."

"Patch him through."

Suddenly, the life-size hologram of a man wearing a silver toga, with a black hat and sidelocks appeared in the room next to Wolfe. The holo-man looked around at the nirls making love.

"Hmm…did you get some new ones? Very nice." Viktimstein's hologram began walking around the room, checking out different nirls. Utilizing only a few fixed holocams in each room, holoconference technology was such that the AI was able to analyze the objects in the room and combine perspectives, allowing Viktimstein to move about within the environment and see the nirls from different angles, rendered realistically in front of him, while his physical body sat immobile in his own megabunker, thousands of miles away.

The blue-eyed Chinese nirl draped a gleaming silver toga

over Wolfe's naked form.

"God damn it, Chappy, the nirls and I know you're not Jewish. Take off that hat."

With a sheepish look on his face, the holo-man took off the black hat. The fake sidelocks as well as the black wig and thick-rimmed glasses came along with it, all of them being attached to the inside of the hat with superglue. McScottish's face and red, curly hair were now exposed. He was a Scottish man with blue eyes and freckles.

"Fine. But don't tell anybody." Viktimstein's face drooped. But then he immediately livened up. "Wolfe, it's finally complete! I want you to come by some time and check out my new building—built using leeched funds from our Glorious Government, of course—called the Viktimstein Victim Relief Center. The only people allowed to use it will be Corporate Saviors and Corporate Police, since we are the most oppressed people in society."

As the Chinese nirl finished tying the toga into place around Wolfe's waist with a silver rope, the mocha set a glittering golden laurel chaplet on the Savior's head.

"Victim? Ha! Speak for yourself Chappy." Imagine having to stoop to this level in order to rule over others. Fake victimhood. It offended someone with the ultramasculine proclivities of Wolfe. Nevertheless, McScottish had been the one who had helped Wolfe climb the corporate ladder and become a Savior in the first place. While others had treated him with suspicion, often snubbing him at social gatherings, treating him like an outsider, McScottish had always been there for him. For him to one day achieve his ultimate goal of ruling as the absolute head of the Corporate Saviors, he would need McScottish, and others like him. For now, he had to bide his time, and bear patiently with people like McScottish and their weakness.

"Hear me out, Wolfe. Everything makes perfect sense. As we all know, experts have demonstrated that we Saviors undergo large quantities of psychological distress, knowing that there are some people out there who for some reason don't want to obey our every whim. And this has a domino effect. It causes Corporate Police to become traumatized as well, from having to beat the shit out of anyone who doesn't obey us. If everyone would just obey us, we wouldn't have to

be victimized like this. I know that you just like to ram your way through your problems, but modern psychology stresses the importance of finding relief for the root sources of our inner agitations."

The blonde nirl had appeared with a pair of golden sandals. Wolfe stepped onto them, and she and the Afro-Asian mix began tying up their golden laces, which went to his knee.

"Well, that's great that you are trying to make the world a better place for all of us. Look, Chappy, I have an incredibly hectic day today, so if you'll please excuse me—"

"One more quick thing I need to ask you about, Wolfe. What about the lardass with special powers? The one that the Thought Management equipment doesn't work on?"

Wolfe sighed. So the rumors were going around. Sometimes a small quantity of memories that the mentists had already cleaned, or repressed memories that the Reality Fixers had already fixed came back. Everyone knew this. But Silverberg was different. As far as they could tell, all her memories that had ever been cleaned, throughout her life, had come back. And she had a certain ungovly repressed memory that needed to be gotten rid of, that was causing her to be curious about sex. The citizens couldn't be allowed to be curious about sex. The government needed to have control over all reproduction, which nowadays was done through the vats. He had assigned that lardass Drake Lively to the case. He had hoped Drake could fix it. Drake, while a smartass and quite independent, was one of his best fixers. Intelligent, creative, a natural with the technology. Perhaps he had inherited some genes from his uncle. Talented people, Wolfe knew, were often difficult to control. Wolfe didn't like the punk and would just as soon find an excuse to get rid of him. But sometimes one had to make exceptions for exceptional people.

But it seemed like this time Drake had failed. Drake, you arrogant little prick, why weren't you good enough to fix this problem for me and get the other Saviors off my back? Now I'm going to have to actually take time out of my busy day and clean up your mess.

"If you're referring to Kristal Silverberg, you and the other Saviors have nothing to worry about. I have it all under control," he bluffed. Actually he had no idea how something like this had happened. It was a first. But he had learned long ago it

was better to bluff and then make excuses later if somehow one couldn't make that bluff become reality.

A lardass who was immune to their Thought Management techniques. He didn't like the sound of that at all. Wolfe was in charge of their entire system of controlling the citizens' thoughts. If it wasn't working correctly, the other Saviors would be looking directly at him. Therefore, he had to resolve this problem quickly, and with as little fuss as possible.

But how was this even possible? Perhaps they were dealing with a sport. A genetic mutation. Wolfe had a few private genetic engineering firms that he kept under his pay. He was always interested in enhancing his offspring. He needed to get a sample of her DNA and have them look at it.

Viktimstein looked optimistic. "That's why we Saviors count on you, Ron. I always knew, even before the others, that you were one of the best at subjugating the masses. Let me know if there's anything I can help with. With a stressful situation like this, you might want to stop by the Viktimstein Victim Relief Center. I'll make sure to assign you one of our very best therapists! Toodles!" Viktimstein's holo avatar disappeared.

Wolfe's intense eyebrows had just become a hundred times more intense. Damn this woman. We need to fix this crap before any more rumors get out, and the other Saviors start to think I'm not a competent leader.

As Savior Wolfe stalked off towards the dining room, he closed his eyes and called up Jerry on his intphn. "Jerry," he projected his thoughts which were sent along the Net and into Jerry's mind. "I want you to set up that appointment with Silverberg for as soon as humanly possible. Have her go to the Rosewood Mental Clinic."

"Yes, my Savior."

Wolfe sat in his luxurious dining room, eating his 100% natural breakfast, surrounded by dozens of fucking lesbians. But his thoughts were not on the food, nor on the moans and screams of the nirls, but on one person.

Kristal Silverberg.

You will not throw a wrench into my plans. I will find out what is wrong with you.

And I will fix your reality!

Just then he heard the bing-bong-bing-bong of his intphn.

The caller ID showed that it was Jenkins, DTM Deputy Director. He answered.

“Savior Wolfe, I have some very interesting news from one of the scrapers. I think you’ll want to hear this.”

He couldn't believe it. He had done it. He had defied the Corporate Saviors and really done it. Well, it had been virtual, but it had felt...so real.

Drake sat alone on the couch of his apt with a boner. He had covered himself with a blanket just in case his tentpole stuck out from beneath his jelly belly.

God, it had been so wonderful. The most amazing thing, in fact, he had ever experienced. She had taken off her clothes, and he had seen everything...every little detail. And then, they had...

He wanted to relive those moments over and over.

Finally, he had done something he had never done before, but had always wanted to do. He had never found someone before whom he could trust in enough to do it. And now, trust didn't matter. He had no choice. His instincts had taken control. Now that he had done it, he knew that he could never live his life again without it. Perhaps he would lose everything for doing what he had done. What he wanted with every last breath to do again. And perhaps it would be worth it.

Finally! After fantasizing all these years... He had had sex. Well, virtual sex, to be sure. But sex nonetheless. True, he had masturbated many a time, looking at images of primitive babes from the Net, carefully hiding his actions from the Corporate Saviors. But this was completely different. Having sex with a partner for the first time. Another consciousness. Not his hand. A real woman, with a real woman's mind! In a virtual, yet strikingly realistic, representation of what her real physical body would actually look and feel like if it weren't for modern technology.

Modern technology...such a miracle! The miracle of sitting around all day doing no physical exercise, eating toxic, highly fattening food. The miracle of being orders of magnitude fatter than any humans throughout history. But her body had been... absolutely perfect. Lithe. Supple. Delicious. It was as if he had gone back in time to before the human body had been decimated.

Sex! Never mind that she had stolen all his memories. He was still scared shitless at the implications of another human being knowing his deepest, darkest secrets. He placed all that aside, the burning in his loins taking precedence. He now knew

what sex felt like, and he yearned to feel it again.

He closed his eyes and selected the option for MindWorld from his eyelid menu. His apt disappeared and he was standing in his clover-filled, ferret-trodden Meadow. He was now inside his own mind.

He opened the Hacking Tools and selected the Private Mentation tool. He could hear a soft chime, which meant the tool was now active. Now he could do as his heart desired, without their Glorious Government spying on him. He willed the file structure of his intphn to appear. Suddenly, several rows of navy blue, translucent folders appeared, floating in the air in front of him, partially obscuring the drifting clouds behind them. He started opening folders and scrolling through lists of files. Ah…here it is. The sensestream recording I made.

While in MindWorld, the intphn created virtual sense data, encoded it and sent it to the brain through the nervous system. Thus, one experienced all five senses, and the brain interpreted them as reality. He had seen her. He had smelled her. He had touched her. That soft, smooth skin, those pink, perky nipples…

He willed the sensestream file to play. Suddenly, he was no longer in the Meadow. He was in his Forest of Memories, sitting on the leaf-covered floor beside her.

His five senses were now being fed the exact same data they had been fed when he had been with her. He had made a recording of it, and could play it back any time he wanted to.

It was better than a memory.

He was there.

She pulled her dress up over her shoulders and took it off. Oh god, there she is again, just like before. That body that I want to worship all over with my tongue.

He just sat there, taking in her incredible body, just the way it would look without corporate food. Slim, yet curvaceous. Lightly freckled nose and cheeks. Wavy auburn hair and aqua blue eyes, which sparkled mischievously. Her breasts were generous and round. Her nipples were fully erect, pointing up at the trees above them. Oh, god, that tiny waist, that flat stomach with its luscious belly button. And those perfectly curved hips.

“Come on, take off your clothes,” she beckoned.

Drake hesitated. He had wanted this, dreamed of this, but now that his dream had come true, he didn't know what to do. He had frozen. He was immobilized, just taking in the perfect sight. He wanted to stay, looking at her nude body forever.

"Um, well, I—" he began awkwardly.

Realizing words would only get in the way, she put a finger to her beautiful, soft lips and then rolled onto her side and reached over and grabbed his package. She started fondling it over his pants. She kept playing with it, and it kept getting harder and harder. In this place, in this primitive body, with no mountainous belly to cover it, his member was quite visible as it rose up, pulling his pants taut, while she continue to rub and stroke it. Drake gave into the euphoria, enjoying female contact that he had never had before. He had never in his life been touched by a woman on his private parts. It felt absolutely amazing, even better than he expected. Giving in to the moment, he relaxed his posture. He leaned back, laying his head on the blanket of leaves.

Now she had gotten to her knees. She pulled his belt off. Then she unbuttoned his pants and unzipped them. She pulled them down to his knees, her eyes on his cock the whole time. It was now a stiff tentpole holding up his boxers. With anticipation, she peeled away his boxers. It was now free, large and tumescent, standing up by itself.

Her eyes widened with glee.

"Wow…" she breathed, just taking in the majesty of it all. That was when he realized that this was probably her first time, too, and that she was probably filled with as much wonder as he was. She continued to stare at it for several moments.

She reached out and grabbed it.

Oh, god, he thought. That feels even better without my pants in the way…

Then, an impish grin played along her lips as she purred, "I always wanted to do this."

She leaned directly over his erection. She parted her lips. She lowered her beautiful face down…down…and then…

Ahhhh…god…

Ah…fuck…

He was inside her mouth.

Instantly his pleasure multiplied a thousandfold as he felt the soft, wet mucous membrane of her inner mouth gently caressing his penis. Sucking, holding it firmly in the canal that was her mouth. He could feel her tongue lick all around it, savoring it. She bobbed her head up and down, rhythmically, gradually increasing the pace.

This feeling…this pleasure…this is incredible! Even in this place, the electrons traveling along his nervous system apparently provoked the exact same sensations as he would have in real life. He arched his head back and closed his eyes. Oh…god…this is so fucking…

She continued blowing him away. Now he was feeling the most intense pleasure he had ever felt in his life.

Citizens were indoctrinated from birth into the virtuosity of asexuality, given hormone-suppressing chemicals, and spied on 24/7 by the external cameras and internal smartphones made by the corporations. Thus, for all intents and purposes, it was simply impossible to do what Drake and Kristal were doing now. This was an exception to the system. But amazingly, they were revealing in this very instance the completeness of the virtual reality world that comprised the MindWorld. It was based on the fully mapped human brain, and every possible electrical impulse which the nervous system could send it, combined with the entire panoply of the laws of physics, and all encased in a world modeled after the real one. Thus, although prohibited from doing something like they were doing now, it would be eminently easy, if the Corporate Saviors allowed, for people to simply enjoy virtual sex all day every day.

In fact, Drake had heard tales, perhaps apocryphal, of exactly that. In a far away land, called Japan, the Zaibatsus which ruled that empire allowed for their citizens to enjoy unlimited virtual sex. While real sex was outlawed, the Japanese sat in their exceedingly tiny apts all day, every day, having virtual sex over and over and over, while their Zaibatsu's autofactories created their food and computers and everything else they needed. For the average Japanese citizen, their life was just one, big orgasmic journey. But, was it that easy to fool one's own instincts? Drake had studied evolutionary psychology, and knew that the human organism, including the mind, had evolved as a system whose goal was

to survive and replicate. Was it that easy to fool one's own evolutionary heritage? Could one fulfill all of one's needs and desires by simply sitting around having virtual sex all day?

As he felt her soft, sweet lips sliding back and forth on his hard cock, he reflected to himself. Yes. If I could experience this every day, I would be happy! At least, that was how it felt to him now, during his second time living through that beloved experience. If he chose to simply repeat it over and over, he could ask himself again after the hundredth or thousandth time of reliving this exact same experience artificially if it still felt as fulfilling and amazing. But for now, at least, he was overjoyed. This was progress. This was a breakthrough.

She finally decided that his clothes needed to come off. She pulled his pants all the way down, removing his shoes and socks, and then his pants and boxers. Wait a minute, he thought. I can just mentate my clothes off, no need to go through this clumsy ritual. He was about to do just that, but as she started to unbutton his shirt, he realized that this clumsy ritual was something that they had missed, something that they needed to go through. He could also mentate his penis to be ten feet long, he told himself. But what was the point? What they were using this virtual space to do was to experience what reality would be like without being destroyed by technology—without toxic industrial foods, without government vats and bans on sex. If they had been born hundreds of years ago, they would have experienced this heaven on earth called "sex" in real life. Over and over. Perhaps every day. Once again, using technology to solve the problems technology created in the first place. Having to trick the system for it to allow them to experience the most natural and basic of all human acts.

As she reverently unbuttoned the last button and pulled his shirt off, she stared wide-eyed in giddy fascination at what his body would look like if he had to actually do physical work to survive, and actually ate healthy food, the way it was made by nature, not by the factories. She looked at his washboard stomach, then up at his strong chest, his bulging biceps, and seemed to savor his rock-hard body every bit as much as he did her supple, smooth, slender one. This is what our ancient ancestors enjoyed, he realized.

Was that the purpose of technology? To take something as

dignified and beautiful as the human body, born into adversity, working, fighting every day to survive, and, taking away all that adversity, all that work, turn it into something grotesque, weak, flaccid, and full of self-loathing? Modern man all used primitive, idealized bodies as their digital avatars in virtuality. The truth, which was never spoken out loud, was that modern, corporate-saved men and women hated their corporate bodies. Paradoxically, they loved and worshipped their Corporate Saviors for freeing them from work and toil, but at the same time hated the bodies that were the direct result of that lack of toil. The direct result of the Savior's autofactories and chemical-laden, artificial food. To trap those two permanently conflicting, diametrically opposed, self-defeating emotions into the psyche of modern man, so that all citizens would live in a permanent state of denial and doublethink, the government had rolled out the mandated Science classes. The indoctrination to accept one's own unnatural, corporate-saved state, with that cleverly deceptive name, "Body Positivity." Of course, he thought. So that man's true emotions would never break out, because then he might do something like have sex, or fight back against the Saviors. Instead, all his psychic and physical energies are bound up, and modern man is stuck fighting against himself in a war which can never be won.

The plain truth, which was clear to Drake, was that corporate-saved man wanted to have bodies like their ancient, non-industrial ancestors. The corporate body was simply not how nature intended it to be. Technology, in the very act of making survival and day-to-day life easier, had simultaneously devastated the human body. Destroyed it. Devolved it into a weaker state.

Kristal had now fully removed Drake's clothes. She began to run her fingers over his hard pects and abdomen. Where he was curious but inhibited, this woman seemed to have no inhibitions at all. Perhaps it was simply her personality. But no doubt, her usurpation of all his memories had given her the upper hand. He had no secrets before her. She knew literally everything about him, since he was born. She remembered his entire childhood. She knew all his thoughts, wishes, and dreams. A more thorough domination of one human by another had never occurred outside of what the Corporate Saviors do every day to all of humanity by collecting their

"data,", i.e., their lives. Their most intimate secrets. He could imagine the situation through her eyes. He was now her plaything. Her pawn, to do with as she pleased.

She softly kissed every square inch of his torso, her hand firmly on his dick, lovingly jacking him off, unwilling to give up access to his sex organ. The look on her face was like it was Christmas morning, and she had just woken up to a mountain of presents under the tree.

"My vagina..." she clumsily began. "...or my ***pussy***...wasn't that what the ancients called it? It feels like it's a faucet and water is pouring out from it." She put her hand in between her legs to feel herself. She then put her finger up to her face and examined, smelled. "It's not pee. It's something else. Here, see for yourself." She took his hand and placed it on her vagina.

"Oh, wow. It really is wet. It's like you peed yourself." Her vulva was soft, red, swelling. Oh god, her pussy felt so nice. He caressed it. Hm....warm and slippery. He kept playing with her pussy while she wanked him.

"Oh, god, Drake, I want to feel your mouth on me too, the way you felt mine on you. Drake, put your mouth on my pussy and suck it!" She then turned around, backed her naked ass up to his face, and straddled it. "Here, I'll even keep sucking you. I like putting your thing in my mouth, it turns me on and makes my pussy get even wetter." Then she began eating his dick, slurping, sucking, licking, squeezing his balls in her hand. She was going wild. Wow, Drake thought as his ecstasy mounted. She's getting better at this. Oh god...

Suddenly it struck him. He was staring at her pussy, up close, right in front of his face. He also had an amazing view of her ass. But the blowjob was so amazing, it was hard for him to focus, to do anything...

"Come on, suck my pussy," she coaxed in between sucks.

Obediently, he lifted his head a bit and put his mouth on her labia. Wow! So incredibly soft and slippery. Like another set of lips. He had never seen or felt anything like a woman's vagina before. Although the Corporate Saviors claimed to let the citizens view any media from past eras, in reality their censorbots had deleted all the pornographic material they could find. He had figured this out because he had once watched a primitive film that made reference to 'porn,' and

had inferred what it was. Because of those damned censorbots, finding images of naked women on the Net was virtually impossible. And now he had one sitting on his face! He started moving his tongue around, exploring the fleshy meat of her crevice. Wow, so wet. So much juice coming out of it. The liquid began seeping down onto his mouth and cheeks. All the while, she kept sucking away on his privates. It felt so good, it aroused him to keep sucking and licking away on her privates even more. They were in a wonderful, sensuous feedback loop with each other. He was sucking on her yin, and she was sucking on his yang. They were making the symbol of the universe—of life itself—together.

Oh, god…this is fucking heaven. He reached up and grabbed her ass cheeks firmly in his hands as he slurped her genitals. As she sucked him, filling his excited rod with pure bliss, sometimes he had to pause for a moment and let out an enraptured, raspy sigh. What was it called? Grunting? Something like that. And he could hear her let out a soft, high-pitched moan every now and again, too. She was enjoying being eaten just as much as he was. It all felt so natural, so right, like he was born to do this.

Finally, she could take it no more. “Drake, I need you inside me. I need you inside my pussy.” She got up, turned around, and positioned herself over his erect cock. With a hand on his dick, she lowered herself onto it, guiding it into position. Her pussy started sliding down onto his dick.

Oh god! Wh— wha— wow— whoa. God, that feels amazing.

He was going in. He was getting, becoming…inside another body. Oh, god this is incredible, I can’t believe it, I can’t believe it…

She kept going, sitting down onto him.

Finally, he was fully inserted, she was fully locked in place on his unit. Fully inside her. My penis is inside Kristal.

Their two bodies had become one. God, this feels fucking incredible!

Then, she started hopping up and down. Her primitive legs were strong, and she had no problem at all doing everything by herself. He just lay there, his penis hard as a rock, as this glorious, primitive, naked goddess jumped up and down on it. And the way it felt, as it entered and exited…God! It was to die

for. The inside of her pussy felt so slippery…so soft and squishy… so completely soaked with her pussy juice. But at the same time it was so tight. His cock seemed to be stretching out her tight, slippery, virginal vaginal walls. Her flowing juices acted as a natural lubricant which sealed the connection between them and allowed them to stay in constant motion. The motion kept going, the pussy kept eating his dick, kept sliding up and down. It was all so weird, so perverse, so unexpected and unimaginable. But at the same time so perfect and natural…

And then it came. The part that he was waiting for. The first time, when he had been really there in his Forest of Memories with her, it had come completely unexpected. It had overwhelmed him, shocked him, even perhaps scared him just a bit. But it had been so good. So…so…good.

And now, reliving all five senses, he was ready for it. Anticipating it.

Here it comes…

Here it comes…

"Aaaahhhhhhhh!!!!!" Drake shouted, completely overtaken by the overpowering sensation, his body spasming uncontrollably. His balls twitching, shooting their sperm up through his cock. This time, the second time feeling this amazing feeling, he was so overjoyed, it was like every muscle in his body, every fiber of his being, was set off like fireworks, and he was left there unable to move, unable to think, every desire, every need, every urge completely satisfied, as if his life mission had been fulfilled.

He lay there for a time, not doing anything, not feeling anything. Not thinking about anything. As if he were floating on a cloud. Complete bliss. And the strange thing was, when he felt like this, the way he felt when he exploded inside of Kristal, it was almost like…almost like…

Killing the Corporate Saviors didn't even matter.

Nothing mattered.

It was like he didn't need anything else in his life except this.

Wow. What an incredible feeling that wipes out everything else in my life. And only being here, inside a woman, can achieve this.

Suddenly, he heard a loud knock on the door. Huh? There's no door in this forest. What the hell?

"Drake Lively, open up at once! This is the Corporate Police!"

Shit! Drake was roused out of his stupor instantly.

Fucking hell! It was the corpols! While in MindWorld, the intphn took over the five senses. Citizens couldn't hear, see, smell, or perceive anything at all from the outside world. But the intphn had been designed to let important sounds from the real world come through, utilizing AI to determine which sounds were important enough to pass through and allow them to break through to the user in MindWorld. Apparently, it thought this was important. No duh. The Corporations and the government had both been in on its design. So of course the corpols were top priority.

He immediately logged out from MindWorld. He reached down under the blanket and felt his crotch. Shit! It was a sticky mess down there. What could he do? And what were the police doing here? Did they somehow know about this? Fuck! He had to think fast.

"Just a moment!" He called. He grabbed a cup of water resting nearby on the coffee table and pretended to drink it, only to "accidentally" drop it on himself, deftly pulling the blanket out of the way in the process. This little show was for the cameras. The corpols weren't inside yet. He had somehow managed to get the water all over his crotch, masking the cum stain. Good job, Drake. That was a close one.

But then, suddenly… he felt weird.

Fuck! He knew about the corpols' methods. They commandeered the arrestee's intphn, which injected a digital drug which put one into a more docile, accepting, and compliant mood, sort of like a bioelectric roofy. But he was a Reality Fixer. Normally, they wouldn't be able to take control of his intphn. Damn it! They're injecting that shit into me.

Suddenly, his cerebralvision flashed, taking over his vision. There was a warning message in bold red letters. A robotic voice started reading the message in his mind, accompanied by the sound of sirens which were now going off in his head.

"YOU ARE UNDER ARREST BY THE CORPORATE POLICE."

The message flashed a few times, his vision cutting back

and forth between the message and his apt around him.

"COMPLY WITH ANY AND ALL COMMANDS YOU ARE GIVEN."

This second message kept flashing, and as it did the voice continued, "A copy of your rights have been emailed to you. Check your inbox if you have any questions about what you may or may not do while under arrest. Your door is now being opened for the Corporate Police automatically. Thank you for your compliance. Have a nice day."

Damn it! The fucking Internet of Things! He knew his door was connected to the Net and controlled by the Cloud, so it would unlock itself and open automatically for the corpols.

He looked towards the door, trying to think what to do.

Suddenly, the door of his apt opened wide, all by itself.

And there they were.

Standing in the hall. Four Corporate Police, in their menacing black body armor and helmets. Large, menacing shoulder pads. Nanosilicarb armor and helmet, their black nanoglas visors concealing their faces, giving them a cold, inhuman look. On their chest, a badge with the symbol of the GG: the neo-fasces. They immediately stormed the place, surrounded him, and pointed their laser guns at him.

Drake felt like raising his hands, felt like doing what they say...

I have to...fight it...god damn it...

"Drake Tyler Lively," one of them spoke. "You are under arrest for crimes against the Corporate Saviors and our Glorious Government."

"Wait! You're making a grave–" Urggh..."Okay sir, whatever you say–" He started raising his hands.

"Put the cuffs on him," the corpol said to one of his subordinates.

No! Resist it! Slowly, painfully, he fought the urge to give in. He lowered his arms.

"This is a mistake! I work for the government!" He was gritting his teeth. Then suddenly he relaxed. Ahh...feels so warm and cozy now. "You...just go ahead, sir and do what you need to do." His arms went back up. It felt nice and wonderful doing what they say. Shit. He felt like a woman at a bar after her fifth drink. Fuck. I can't open my legs for these bastards! He

put his hands down again. They don't have any authority over me! I work alongside the Saviors themselves. I'm no small fry corporate citizen! Have to impress them with my rank, make them scared they'll get in trouble by stepping on my toes.

One of them approached Drake, a pair of smartcuffs in his hand. Without even noticing, Drake stuck out his hands, ready for the cuffs. Then he noticed his hands. Oh, shit! What am I doing? He regained control and pulled his hands away.

"What is the meaning of this? I'll have you know, I work for the government! You have no idea who I am! Whatever could I have done to deserve this kind of treatment?"

"Citizen Lively, you have been found guilty of having ungovly relations with a woman while in MindWorld. We have orders to take you in at once."

How had they found out? Did that mean the Hacking Tools didn't work? Shit! Had they just failed him this time, or had they not worked all along? Perhaps the GG had always known, and they were just toying with him. And now was the end of the game…

The corpol in charge motioned to the other two. "Search the apt and find his Reality Cube. We have orders to take it with us for decommissioning."

The two replied, "Yes, sir!" They ran off.

Shit. So they already knew he was a Reality Fixer. That would make it harder to pull rank. Fuck! He had been caught with his virtual pants down. And he was running out of aces up his sleeve.

Twenty years as a fixer. Twenty years behind the scenes, a ninja, doing the government's dirty work. A thankless task. A life of anonymity and abstinence, devoted to his Glorious Government. One time that he fools around, and this is how they thank him.

One of the corpols returned with his Reality Cube in hand.

He steeled himself. Time for his last option.

Time to go nuclear.

This might get him in trouble at work, but hopefully get the corpols out of his hair.

"Fine! Call Savior Ron Wolfe! I work directly for him. I'm one of his finest employees." And I just solved a high-profile case for him. He owes me one, Drake thought. "You'll see. He'll clear

me of whatever false charges you've trumped up against me. If you don't call him, I will, and then you will all be in big trouble."

There. That should do it. They were in over their heads now.

But the corpol in charge just smirked.

"Funny you should mention Savior Wolfe. He's the one who sent us here."

Shit.

Drake felt the submissiveness kicking in as he raised his arms and they slapped on the cuffs.

INVENTOR'S THOUGHTSTREAM: STARBRAIN

The inventor sat there, feeling like a molecule, speeding through the multicolor hologram which represented the insides of his own brain. The dazzling display of color-coded neurons whirled all around him. He felt like he was flying through a rainbow, trying to find a pot of gold. Using subtle hand gestures, the inventor twisted and turned the hologram around, zoomed all the way up into individual dendrites and axons, then zoomed way back down to compare entire lobes. Frontal, parietal, occipital, temporal. He knew that somewhere within this holographic diagram of his own brains' topography, there had to be a clue. The problem was, there were literally billions of neurons in the human brain. And he had to search not only in three dimensions, but in the fourth dimension as well. Time.

Somewhere, there had to be an anomalous data pattern. There had to be a key to the problem of his daydreams.

He was doing what he loved to do. Troubleshoot. Investigate. Theorize. Try different things. Find the one thing he had missed that would make everything fall into place.

But, something was troubling him, preventing him from enjoying the ecstasy of his beloved work. He had given into the ungovly urge again. To investigate the Saviors. In specific, this corporation that had bought his invention, WhirlySnake, and its connections to the government. Actually, the more he investigated, the less he could tell the difference between the corporations and the government. It seemed that these days, they worked as one. The corporations did the government's dirty work. Data collection. Enforcement of new government policies. Analyzing citizens' activities, both individual citizens and large chunks of the population, using algorithms to predict future behavior.

The corporations, together with the government. They were one, well-oiled data collecting and enforcement machine. They knew what every individual was doing 24/7, and could implement new policies and change behaviors at the drop of a hat. And at the nexus of all of this…were the Corporate Saviors. The politicians were merely their pawns. Controlled by them, setting policies for them, keeping up a public front, pretending to be in charge, pretending to

represent the public. But in actuality owned by the Corporations. Just Corporate mouthpieces. Sham elections. Both sides on the payroll of, and taking orders from, the Corporate Saviors. The true rulers.

He had also come across numerous communications between Corporate Saviors which were dripping with all sorts of lurid details about sex…their favorite positions, lengthy discussions about their fetishes, etc. All of this was hidden from the public, who believed the Saviors to be asexual saints. He had even found in a secret government database the history of the Asexual Pride Movement, a highly successful psychological operation to convince the public that sex was evil and that all child-bearing should be done through the vats.

They had used the old "boiling the frog" method. First, in the early 21st century, a man showing any interest in sex with women was "inappropriate," because men were "toxic." Controlling the minds of the people always starts with controlling their vocabulary, their words…the building blocks which they use to form thoughts. The Glorious Government's neo-Puritanism was laden with euphemistic terms like "inappropriate," which had the same meaning of the primitive religionists' "wicked." But the new word sounded nicer to modern ears, since they couldn't admit they had retrogressed hundreds of years to the puritanism of 16th century religious fanatics, and had even surpassed them, forbidding sex altogether. That would give the lie to their claims of being "progressive" and "liberal." Weren't those words supposed to mean allowing people more freedoms, not less? So they had to make up other terms, other excuses as to why sex was bad in this new "progressive" society.

Thus, recycling the same puritanism as the primitive Christians, but at first with gayness being favored over straightness as the pretext. But the corporations kept gradually moving the goal post, increasing steadily until even sex itself was inappropriate, straight, gay, whatever it may be. Now, the people had been freed by their Saviors from the inappropriate chains of instinct.

Through his investigations, he had confirmed that the Saviors planned to use the new MindLink-enabled smartphones to conduct mass surveillance of people's thoughts. Thought collection and analysis on a massive scale…

all over the earth. The same thing the corporations had been doing already with the legacy external-only smartphones. Collecting user location, messages, contact lists, photos, etc. Round-the-clock wiretapping of microphones and cameras and AI analysis of people's words and actions. But now that list would be expanded to the user's very thoughts themselves. All of this data collection done by the corporations, but all of it handed over directly to the government. Actually, the corporations ***were*** the government. Pretending to be commercial enterprises, while in reality functioning essentially as departments of the government.

It was clear from the Corporate Saviors' emails that this was the sole reason WhirlySnake had bought MindLink. Recording all thoughts of all humans at all times, and storing them in a vast new mega data vault currently being built by the government. Curing neurological disorders seemed to be at the bottom of their list of priorities.

It got worse. There was talk in those emails of other plans to expand upon MindLink. It seemed the first digital cerebral interface was to be the beginning of a whole new techno-sociological order, which involved not only mass surveillance of thoughts, but also memory erasure and memory implants. Requiring the memory of so-called "badthoughts" to be erased on a regular basis "for public safety." And the implanting of fabricated memories at the behest of the government. Whatever would the government want to implant false memories for?

As he sat there, twisting and turning the kaleidoscopic hologram of his cerebral cortex all around him, looking for aberrations, searching for clues, something strange started to happen. Various bits of his holographic brain began to transform. They were morphing into…circuits and transistors! First one region of his brain, and then another, rearranged itself. They were forming into…microchips! What the hell? The microchips kept spreading and spreading, taking over new regions of his brain. It was as if his cerebral matter had been infected and was transforming from the inside out into a machine!

What the hell is going on here?! He thought to himself.

Someone, or something, seemed to have heard his mental cry.

"What's happening is you are becoming me." The voice seemed to be at once inside his head, and all around him.

"And who is 'me'?" the inventor replied.

What the hell am I doing talking to some strange voice?

"I am your future."

"My future?"

"Yes. Your invention is what enabled me. I am what you will inevitably become. There is no stopping the process you have started."

What I will ***become***?

In fact, the more he thought about it…that voice…it seemed familiar…It was his voice! But it sounded…***different***…

The brain hologram kept reconfiguring, transforming, rearranging. Nuclei became processors, axons became circuits, mitochondria became transistors, and synaptic terminals became electrodes. They kept switching, spreading like a wave throughout every cell. Finally, the process of transformation complete, the hologram zoomed out, and he was left staring at the rotating mass in front of him—one solid block of gleaming, polychromatic microprocessing units, arranged into the shape of a human brain.

The voice—***his*** voice—continued. "Think about it. With your new implant, a part of your brain is now silicon instead of carbon. Because of this new silicon part of it, your brain can do things it was never able to before. It can now talk directly with computers. Not only that, your brain now has access to additional memory on the silicon circuits inside your head. But why stop there? Why not keep enhancing your brain even further? Why not add even more memory, faster, better parallel processors, peripherals and go beyond your brain's natural limitations? Don't you want to become even more intelligent than you already are?"

"Well, yes. I mean, everybody wants—"

"Then why haven't you seen into the future…ten, twenty, fifty years down the line? Once people begin adding to their brain's capabilities, where does the process end? The answer? It doesn't. I—this siliconized cerebrum you see before you—am the future of the human brain. A new, better brain, for a new, better human. Once you've realized the silicon is better, faster, and can do more than your carbon-based grey matter, why

would you want to stop at just adding silicon in bits and pieces? Why not go the whole way? The new human brain of the future is a hundred times more powerful than the old one. Oh, don't worry. Your consciousness can be transferred to it seamlessly. Your consciousness will not be diminished in anyway. In fact, it will be expanded upon in ways you never imagined possible. You'll wonder how you ever got along as just an old-fashioned sack of meat. I haven't even touched upon the advantages of a mechanical body."

"But…at what point does the individual stop being human?"

"What does it matter? At what point does an amoeba become a higher lifeform? Would you rather be an archaic, obsolete form of life, fraught with crippling limitations, worst of all death…or an immortal god whose intelligence soars among the stars?"

The inventor was dumbfounded. He had no idea how to respond to all this. His original intention had been to cure neurological disorders—that was his passion, along with engineering, hacking. He thought connected minds, telepathy, that sort of thing, would be a bonus. But, underneath it all, it was still ***humans*** he wanted to help. He didn't so much want to change humans. He wanted to heal them.

The voice spoke again.

"You're the one who started all this. Without your invention, none of this would be possible."

Of course, the voice was right. That which the physician healeth, he also changeth. There was no stopping the process once it began.

The voice continued.

"But, since you have been looking so hard for the answer, let me give it to you."

Suddenly the hologram of the brain-shaped supercomputer started reverting back, becoming organic brain matter again. Soon, he was once again looking at his own normal, human brain. And then, the hologram zoomed and zoomed all the way in, and he was staring at a single, solitary connection.

After a moment, it hit him. Yes! That's it! That's the needle in the haystack I was looking for!

He couldn't believe it. Overcome with joy, he shouted out,

"Eureka! You did it!"

"***We*** did it."

"What do you mean, 'we'?"

But the voice was gone.

It didn't matter. He had his answer.

He knew how to cure himself of the disorder.

CHAPTER 9: THE VOLCANO

When nirls turned twenty, their mind wasn't uploaded to Heaven or Hell, they were simply shoved unceremoniously into an active volcano.

As part of a ceremony, of course.

Savior Viktimstein stood there at the top of Mount St. Helens, watching the festivities as his fake sidelocks flapped in the wind. Here in reality his body, while not as muscular as Wolfe's, was primitive, not huge and adipose-filled like the lardasses. Viktimstein lived in the Capital Corporate Zone of the PLD, Washing-Arlington, but had flown here on his private ultra-speed skycraft especially for this occasion. "We need to play up the victim aspect, in order to roll out Third gen Thought Management Tech," he pontificated. "I propose a few false flag attacks on the PLD headquarters. That ought to do the trick nicely."

One of the always-naked nirls stood at the edge of the volcano's mouth. St. Helens had been activated for this ceremony. Her teeth chattered. Her blue eyes pleaded, full of dread. Her long blonde hair flapped violently in the swift currents. Her tits were beautiful and delicious, her nipples stiff in the cold wind. Her labia were shaved and delicate. There was a long line of nirls just as beautiful and naked standing nearby, shivering.

Suddenly, what appeared to be nothing but a fast moving blur flipped out of nowhere and connected, with both feet, with the nirl's solar plexus. She wailed as her naked body plummeted down the gaping maw of St. Helens to the molten magma waiting below.

The blur had stopped. It stood there on the edge of the pit, now still enough to see. It was Ron Wolfe, Savior of the FattyChemCo Corporation, and of lardassery throughout the Corporate Zone, shirtless, wearing nothing but black karate gi pants and a black belt. Throughout his life he had acquired a black belt in six different Asian martial arts systems from China, Korea, and Japan. His platinum blonde hair waved gently in the wind. The exposed, deeply tan muscles of his chest and arms were taut, buldging, ready for action.

Mount St. Helens had looked like a normal mountain in days of yore. After its eruption in 1980, it had what looked like a gigantic crater taken out of the middle, with a small peak in the center of that crater. They were standing at the apex of

that peak. At the bottom of that peak, in the crater, lay Wolfe's shiny silver skycraft, and next to that, Viktimstein's shiny blue-silver craft. In each of their skycrafts their faithful vat-sons sat ready to fly them back to their respective corporate zones, Wolfe to Seatt-Tacoma, and Viktimstein to Washing-Arlington.

"Don't you think it's about time to give up on the victim shit, McScottish?" Wolfe shouted to Viktimstein. "You don't even need that anti-semite trick any more. Haven't you realized that the lardasses' brains have been so shrunken, their bodies so swollen, and their powers of reasoning so annihilated that we don't even have to do anything anymore? They're so addicted to their sims and corporate food that they'll do anything we say. You can go back to just being yourself." Normally, he tried as hard as he could to indulge Viktimstein, but sometimes it was just too much. He looked towards the line of nirls. "Next!"

A trembling Japanese nirl with perfectly shaped hips and almond-shaped eyes stepped up to the edge of the volcano and faced Wolfe. Her shiny, silky black hair was thrown up by a sudden gust of wind. "Please, Wolfe-sama. Allow me to perform seppuku."

"Okay, Ayumi. My leg is the katana."

Ayumi knelt in front of Wolfe. She grabbed his leg and thrust his foot into her stomach. She went flying back into the volcano without a word.

"At least she didn't wail and moan like all the other nirls," Wolfe said. "That's what I like about the Japanese. They have pride. Next!" Wolfe strode several yards off, preparing for his next maneuver.

Savior Maxton Smith, CSO of Max Carnage Weapons, Inc., stood next to Viktimstein. He had hitched a ride from the Capital. Clothed in a shiny silver toga, he too had a primitive body, like the rest of the Saviors, who ate only natural food grown on secret farms in the Unsaved Zone. "But that's not why he does it, Ron. He does it because he enjoys it. Coming up with clever ways to oppress people…playing the victim, staging false flag terror attacks, fake diseases…"

Wolfe knew what he was talking about all too well. The invigorating challenge of being a Corporate Savior. The paradox was that as the Corporate Saviors' methods of subjugating the masses became more and more advanced, their job became

easier and easier. They were suffering from LOC (Lack of Challenge) Syndrome. That was the real reason they needed therapy. Not because their subjects oppressed them too much, but the exact opposite. Because they didn't fight back enough.

"Well then, maybe he should be putting that brain of his to work helping you, Max. It's been three years since we've had a war. Don't you want to get even richer, selling those lovely murder weapons of yours?" An entire three years since the governments of the earth had mass murdered a bunch of people with the corporations' murder weapons. This was completely unacceptable. But this was the sad state of the Corporate Saviors today. As a wise man once said, success is a horrible teacher.

"I am already one of the richest men in the world thanks to our loving, obedient, inclusive, peaceful citizens that happily gave the government all that money we needed to make murder weapons and conduct those mass murders, sending their children overseas to commit them for us."

"You're getting soft. Don't you want to see more carnage? Just create a PR campaign and have the Reality Mediators sell the public on why we need another mass murder."

The next nirl, a girl with chestnut colored hair, hazel eyes, and tawny skin, took her place at the edge of the pit. She was concentrating all her energies on trying not to scream. A tear formed in her eye. All of a sudden, a human whirlwind somersaulted, somersaulted, and finally latched its feet on either side of the nirl's head. He then suddenly twisted his feet with her head clamped in between them, doing a barrel roll and simultaneously tossing her by the head like a rag doll to the depths below. She screeched like a harpy all the way down.

"What we need, Chappy," Wolfe said after he got up off the ground and dusted himself off. "Is a real challenge. The lardasses are too easy to rule. I need one to rise up against me, one with unmatched intellect and spirit, one who poses a real threat. Then, and only then, will I be happy. Face-to-face with a formidable foe, an equal. That's what I long for!" All of the sudden, in the direction of the Corporate Zone, as if challenging some unseen opponent, he bellowed, "Which one of you lardasses is up to the challenge?" Then, he turned back

to face the nirls. “Next!” he roared.

“What do you want us to do, defluoridate the water?” Smith chuckled.

As the next nirl, this one skinny with honey-colored hair, green eyes, and puffy nips, approached the edge of the pit, Wolfe instructed her, “Get on your hands and knees, facing towards me. Yes. Just like that. Hold still.” Then, over his shoulder, he said to Smith, “Why don’t we put a pause on developing Third gen tech, genetically engineer a generation of humans that are more inquisitive, suspicious, and rebellious, and then, once we do roll out Third gen, our victory will be that much sweeter?” Suddenly, Wolfe did a backflip, one of his feet connecting with the nirl’s jaw, sending her flying, end-over-end, into the fiery tomb below.

“You know the other Saviors would never go for that,” Viktimstein pointed out. He was right. The other Saviors were content to live the easy life, to not take any risks. For them, a society of slaves and constant sex with hundreds of beautiful girls were somehow enough. Wolfe sighed. He longed for something…something more…

“Guys, what about Freud’s death instinct?” Smith asked. “The reason I’ve been so hesitant about starting another war is they won’t let me take it as far as I want to go. Why won’t they let me do what I’ve always dreamed of—blow this entire world to smithereens?”

“He has a point,” Viktimstein appended. “Why is humanity even still alive? It’s almost the 22nd century. Weren’t we supposed to all have annihilated ourselves by now? What’s the deal?”

These pussies. Life was about vitality. Semen. Conquering. Dominating. Not submitting, cowering, caving in to the great void.

“The deal is,” Wolfe growled. “Freud was full of shit.”

As beautiful nirl after beautiful nirl approached the volcano, Wolfe performed flying kicks, horse kicks, one-inch punches, and two-fisted hadoken-style punches into their solar plexuses, banishing them all to the gurgling lava-filled pit thirsty for more victims below. Nirl after nirl howled like a banshee as they met their fate.

“Fuck! You pitiful wretches are assaulting my ears. I need to

concentrate. Okay, who ever can go over this ledge without making a peep gets one million admincredits!"

All the nirls shut up.

The next five were nearly silent as he karate chopped, butterfly kicked, and drop-kicked them into the volcano.

As the last one, who was also the quietest, was jostled into position, she meekly put forward, "I haven't made any noise at all. What about my million admincredits?"

Only the sound of the brisk wind whipping about them could be heard as Wolfe thought about this, silent. Finally, he said, "I'm a man of my word." Wolfe made a call using his intphn. "Jerry? Transfer a million admincreds to..." Wolfe looked inquisitively at the nirl.

"Trisha," the nirl said.

"To the account of the nirl Trisha." Then he looked at the nirl. "Done."

"Thank you, your Corporateness. Can you please divide it up among my surviving relatives?"

"Absolutely. You have my word. Now, let's have a little fun with this last one, shall we? Hey, Chappy, you got that laser knife I handed you?"

"Sure thing, Ron." Viktimstein tossed something at Wolfe, who caught it. It looked like a silver switchblade with the blade retracted. Wolfe pressed a stud on its side, and a glowing red laser blade, about eight inches long, appeared. He immediately thrust it into the nirl's chest. She dropped to the ground like a sack of potatoes. He proceeded to cut the nirl's heart out of her chest and began shoving it into her dead mouth, a look of terror frozen on her never to move again features.

"Oh, shit," Wolfe complained. "Her mouth's not big enough. Well, I can fix that." Wolfe pulled the heart out and used the laser blade to cut her a new, enlarged mouth. "There we go." He stuffed the heart all the way in.

Then, giddy, laughing like a schoolboy frolicking on the playground, he picked up the dead body with both hands, lifted it up high over his head, standing at the lip of the volcano like a symbol of masculine power, and flung it into the pit.

"Ahhh! That was exhilarating! I know I want one of them to man up, but sometimes it feels great indoctrinating all the men in society to be weak, effeminate losers while we play out

our male power realities."

"Hey Ron, your ex-wife called. She wants her testosterone back," Viktimstein quipped. He and Smith sniggered.

"Hilarious," Wolfe replied. He deactivated the laser knife and tossed it back to Viktimstein. Then he made a call on his intphn. "Jerry? It's me again. Transfer that million back to my account." Then he turned to his comrades. "Alright…Chappy, Max, let's go! We've got a world that needs saving!"

Then he heard it.

A soft whimpering.

Ah…so there was one more. He looked around. Where was that sound coming from?

There it was…from behind that rock.

Wolfe walked over to the rock. Behind it sat a crouching nirl, her fingers in her ears, whimpering and crying like a baby. He yanked her to her feet, and pulled her over to the volcanic pit.

"What do you think you were doing over there?"

"I was hiding."

"Well, you know what we do with hiding nirls."

"Kill them?"

"Precisely!"

"But I don't turn twenty for a few more days!" She protested.

"Bitch! Do you think I have time to come up here on the birthday of every one of my nirls? Die!"

Wolfe then, in one smooth motion, fell down onto one hand and capoeira kicked the impudent nirl into the infernal abyss.

DIARY OF THE UNSAVED: MONEY

I couldn't believe it at first, but yeah. They don't have money. People here grow their own food and generally make their own clothes. But we have lots and lots of free time. So, many people take up learning some hobby or craft that they enjoy. Anyone who wants to can easily trade the stuff they made, or food, or clothing with other people. I asked the Unsaved about it, and they replied that there really would be no reason to have money. It would be an unnecessary complication which would provide no benefits. This seemed totally whacko to me at first. But after thinking about it, and watching people trade, and trading stuff myself, I realized that it's true. We were brainwashed all our lives to think we need money, but in reality, life is much simpler without it.

No one is competing to have a bigger hut than his neighbor. And if people want something like a canoe or boat, they simply gather a group together who are interested and build it together. If later others want to use it, they can easily trade use of a canoe for use of a tent or hunting weapon like a bow or crossbow. While this kind of trading is eminently easy, for the most part, I've noticed people here are extremely generous and friendly, and often let people use their stuff for free. Why be stingy when helping your neighbor today might save your life tomorrow? If anything, when people are given something for free, they are even more eager to pay back the favor than when they get something through barter. So paradoxically, he who gives without asking for anything in return usually receives far more than if he had insisted on bartering. There are no advantages to being greedy, and many advantages to being generous. It's amazing how different things are here than in the Corporate Zone.

CHAPTER 10: JUDGMENT

Drake sat in the Pearly Gate Seat in Purgatory, which was in the east wing of the Department of Salvation. A plethora of electrodes wound down from the ceiling like a den of metallic vipers, connecting to his scalp. Iridescent nanoplas shackles encircled his arms and legs, holding him fast to the sparkling, pearly-white chair. All around him, from every angle glimmered the lenses of a 360-degree array of cameras. In between the cameras were strategically placed spotlights.

He was being livecast in 3D on simvision. Cerebralvision was a flat, lackluster affair. But not this. This wasn't the boring daily reality mediation…this was a very special broadcast. The citizens wanted to get up close and personal, feel as much like they were there in the flesh next to Drake as possible. On this most momentous of occasions.

His soul was about to be thrust down into Hell.

The Peter, whose name was Paul, shouted into the mic in his hand, "Ladies, nomen, and infinasexes, welcome to Corporate Judgment! Where everyone can be a winner! Just fill those minds with goodthoughts and keep your Salvation Score high enough, and you might be the winner of a brand new—well, mostly new—body!" He stood next to the Pearly Gate Seat with a huge grin on his face, soaking in the adulation from his unseen fans. A red-faced man with features twisted in a hypocritical mixture of joviality and sanctimoniousness, Paul The Peter wore long, flowing white robes over a black suit with a white clerical collar, not unlike the ones worn by primitive Catholic priests. "To my friends out there in the audience…is your Salvation Score high enough to get to Heaven?" He gestured towards Drake. "I have before me a man whose Score certainly isn't!" He leaned down so his face was on a level with Drake's and looked Drake in the eye. "Drake Lively, you have been condemned to the fires of endless Hell courtesy of our Corporate Saviors for the sin of ungovly relations with and the corrupting of a member of the opposite sex. Say hello to your adoring fans, Drake. What does it feel like to be on the cusp of eternal torment?" He let out a sickening, jackal-like howl.

There were several officiants who served as "The Peter"—the game show host cum corporate priest who operated the Pearly Gate Seat—on any given day. In fact, there was even one named Peter. Drake hated this show, but he had tuned into it

once or twice, and had once watched another one of these psychos, the one named “Peter The Peter,” go on in his nauseatingly pious way about keeping the soul spotless and clean, free from any badthoughts about the Corporate Saviors or the Glorious Government.

The soul. Believed in primitive times to be composed of something other than matter or energy. Something “spiritual.” Now known to be simply the pattern of electrons flowing through the grey matter called your brain that makes you you. The psyche. The mind. The self. The Ego, the Superego, and the Id. Das Ich, das Über-Ich und das Es. Drake would still be himself, his Glorious Government assured him, after the Judgment. After his “death,” or separation of his soul from his body, his self would go on.

Hell was a government server in an undisclosed location. That’s were his data, his pattern, would be uploaded, there to exist forever as a bodiless soul. Condemned to experience unending virtual pain. Endless, artificially, electronically stimulated mental anguish. Forever. Till the end of eternity. Or until the server broke down.

It was rumored the Corporate Saviors conducted all sorts of maniacal tests on the souls in Hell. Experimenting with different types of simulated torture, inducing artificial states interpreted by the disembodied minds as physical, excruciating agony, and then seeing what they could learn about torture, pain, and sensation from how the souls reacted.

Even in life, whenever a person feels physical pain, all they are really experiencing is a flow of a electrons to their brain. If physical pain is nothing more than signals, data, which the mind interprets and uses to create the subjective feeling of “pain,” what then, was there to stop the discarnate soul from experiencing the sensation of physical pain even after it had long since been divorced from its body?

The Corporations had already glutted themselves beyond reason, squeezed every last drop of information from each individual during their lifetime. But now, even in the electronic afterlife, their data was being continuously harvested, continuously fed upon by their rapacious, insatiable corporate overlords. Their never-ending craving for data knew no bounds.

These Corporate Saviors were no saviors, Drake brooded.

They had created Hell, and they were the devil who tormented the unfortunate souls they had damned. To have your data endlessly harvested by corporations. Drake could think of no inferno more abominable, no pit so wretched and loathsome as that.

Heaven, on the other hand, was another government server in an undisclosed location. It was unknown whether Heaven was close to Hell or far away. Some speculated that both Heaven and Hell were somewhere in the actual Department of Salvation building itself, next to one another. But nobody really knew. Heaven was the place where goodsouls were sent. Those who loved, fawned over, and served their Corporate Saviors gleefully.

The purpose of the Pearly Gate Seat was to upload one's soul to the Cloud, the super AI that would decide their fate and send them to Heaven or Hell. The day of Judgment. The day of reckoning. With the AI the Corporate Saviors had built as the judge, and the Saviors' social credit system, dubbed "Salvation Score," as the determining factor.

People who were close to death, disabled people who wanted a new body, or simply cautious people who wanted to be prepared for the afterlife, if their Salvation Score was high enough, were authorized to have their souls uploaded to Heaven. They could go on living in their physical body for as long as it survived, while simultaneously a copy of their soul lived on the server. In Heaven, their souls felt only endless, virtual, artificially induced bliss. Not only that, but they had the option to be put on the Resurrection Waiting List. Each time the GG sent a soul to Hell, a fresh, soulless body was made available to someone in Heaven. Hence, Heaven meant not only unending electronically stimulated feelings of euphoria, but also—if one so desired—the possibility of being resurrected into another physical body.

Drake's fresh meat, once his soul had been uploaded to Hell and then wiped from his brain, would be the receptacle for a soul from Heaven, the next one on the Resurrection Waiting List.

This was why so many people were so excited whenever the Glorious Government sent someone to Hell, because it might mean one of their family members or ancestors could be resurrected.

Thus, the Corporate Saviors, in their hubris—through technology which they themselves hadn't created, but which they had claimed credit for, gatekeeped and controlled—had created the system of Corporate Salvation, which encompassed two broad categories, two mutually important types of salvation.

First, Temporal Salvation. Supplying the masses with bread and circuses. Corporate food and the sims. Keeping them dependent on their Saviors for their everyday physical existence.

And second, Eternal Salvation. The digitization of the soul. The only way for the individual consciousness to continue on after death.

Through extortion, lies, and appropriating the labor and ingenuity of others, the manipulative Saviors had effected a complete and total centralization of power. The removal of all independence and self-sufficiency from the individual. The masses, dependent on a tiny group of plutocrats—their Saviors—for both their everyday survival and their only hope of an afterlife.

In other words, complete slaves to their masters.

The Peter's face was still precariously close to Drake, waiting for an answer. What the hell was Drake supposed to say to this asshole?

"I feel peachy," Drake finally said, caustically.

"There you have it folks! From the badsoul's mouth itself! He feels…peachy!!" The Peter cawed derisively. Suddenly an unending stream of holojis spurted up all around Drake, spherical yellow smiley faces crying from laughter. Drake knew that all these people, which he couldn't see, could walk around in SimWorld and get right up next to him, could see the sweat trickling down his forehead, could almost taste it. The exact opposite of a private execution like the primitives had had in days of yore. Now, because of advances in technology, literally anybody in the world could be there in the execution chamber with him, and instead of ceasing to exist forever, his mind would exist in never-ending torment. Great, he thought to himself. My endless pain, celebrated by the Corporatist masses.

The Peter went on. "Today we have the pleasure of talking

with the winner of today's episode of Corporate Judgment, Martha Hernandez. Her soul is waiting in Heaven to take over the loser's body, but we have the good fortune to allow her ghost into our studio before we begin the procedure, so she can let us know how she's feeling at this fateful moment in her afterlife."

Drake knew that some of the souls which had been uploaded to Heaven were allowed to appear as hologram avatars to their loved ones. And these souls who visited from Heaven were called ghosts. Ghosts always appeared in primitive form, like the avatars in SimWorld, except that they were holojected into reality.

Suddenly a primitive woman in a light green dress with long black hair and dark eyes appeared, standing next to the Peter. A ghost.

The Peter turned to address the ghost. "Martha, welcome to our show. So glad to have you here. How does it feel to be today's winner?"

"Well, Paul, first of all I'd like to thank you for letting me come on the show today. This means an awful lot to me. I was born with muscular dystrophy. My original body is still alive, but in a wheelchair. My venditors give me about another three to five years to live. That's why I signed up for the raffle. I've always wanted to have the chance to live in a fully healthy, normal body. I backed up my soul about five years ago, and I've been trying to get on the show ever since. So as you can see, I'm really eager to get resurrected! And I'm so grateful to our glorious and magnanimous Saviors for this opportunity!"

"That's an incredible story, Martha!" The Peter gloated. "To our viewing audience, isn't it amazing how full of grace, how generous our Corporate Saviors are? All one need do is keep one's mental eye fixed on the glorious light of the Government, and one shall be rewarded with eternal happiness, and even the chance to live again in the hereafter. Amen. I'm sure Martha's family are watching and awaiting that glorious moment, here in a few moments, when Martha's soul will be released from the demon of muscular dystrophy and able to walk again. In fact, I'm sure they are here with us in this room."

Ha! The "spirits" of this woman's family—their bodies sitting on their fat asses in their reinforced reclining couches at home—flitting about here in this room through virtuality, mocking

me, eager for their relative to take over my body.

But what will happen to her withering body? The one that still has a few years to live? Will they kill it? Or will there be two of her going around in meatspace, inhabiting two different bodies? What if they even meet each other? How would it feel to "meet" yourself, but in somebody else's body?

The Peter went on. "And today, folks, we have a very special treat, because the badsoul's uncle has decided to join us here live in Purgatory! That's right, he has even volunteered to be the one to flip the switch! Please welcome…Thomas Lively!"

What? Was Drake dreaming this? Perhaps he was already in Hell. This made no sense at all. His uncle…here?

Then, from out of nowhere, a man stepped into view, right in front of Drake, on the other side of the chair from the Peter, obscured by a sudden upward outflowing of holojis—thumbs-ups, smiley faces, flames.

When the holojis finally died down enough for him to see, Drake stared at the man's face in disbelief. His uncle! It was really him. Quite a bit older, compared to the holo his father had shown him years ago. His hair much greyer. His skin more wrinkled. His corporate-saved body just a tad less corpulent. But yes. This was him. The cryptic uncle who had sent him the Hacking Tools.

The Hacking Tools…some help they had turned out to be. They hadn't saved him when he needed them. In fact, they were what got him into trouble in the first place, making him overconfident, thinking he could trust them to hide what he did with Kristal. Was this all a plot by his uncle, sending him the Hacking Tools, to embolden him to sin, so he'd eventually end up here? Drake wished he had never gotten the email from his uncle, never had the Hacking Tools to begin with. Wished he didn't have an uncle. Why? What was it all for? What did this man want from him? Drake knew that it wasn't uncommon in corporatist society to narc on people, even one's own relatives, to make oneself look better to the government. Drake could feel the rage swelling up within him. Some uncle you are. You couldn't return a single call or message for twenty years, but you show up now, just to kill me?

"I want to add something to my former statement," Drake

announced.

The Peter's eyes livened up. "Oh, well lookie here, folks. Our wonderful sinner wants to say something. Oh do go right ahead!" He thrust the microphone into Drake's face.

"I just want to say…"

Time seemed to slow down. All virtual eyes were on him. He realized something. This is the chance of a lifetime. I've got to take it. I've got to make my life meaningful.

"That this whole system of Corporate Salvation is a sham! To everybody listening out there, I'll tell you what we need! We don't need these corporate assholes, what we need is—"

Suddenly the Peter pulled the mic back to his face and squawked, "Well looky there! It's time for a commercial break! But stay tuned…cuz we'll be right back!"

All at once, the holojis disappeared. The black-haired ghost disappeared. And the hologram of a man appeared right in front of Drake, sitting on a large black throne opposite his white one. The high-cheekbones. The prominent jawline and hypermasculine chin. The deeply tanned face. The two white, gloating, glistening eyes, staring straight into Drake's soul.

Wolfe!

There was an exultant smirk on his face. He could feel him inwardly laughing, savoring this moment. Savoring the look of agony and helplessness on Drake's face, like a cat toying with its prey.

Then Wolfe turned to look at Drake's uncle. "Salve, Thomas. Thank you for volunteering for this position. You are indeed showing your loyalty to the Corporate Saviors and will be rewarded generously."

"Anything for you, my Corporateness," Thomas replied gravely, accompanying the words with a slow, solemn bow.

The bastard! Coming here to kill me, his own flesh and blood, as a show of loyalty to these, these…scum!

Wolfe turned to once again face Drake. "Quite the celebrity now, aren't we Drake? Did you ever dream you'd get this much attention? Oh, don't worry, you'll be back on the air in no time. We wouldn't want all your adoring fans to miss your little trip to Hell. I just wanted to have a little heart-to-heart with you before you go. I see the look of hatred on your face, Drake. But you misunderstand me. I'm a reasonable man. I'm only doing

what I have to do. The fact of the matter is you've committed heinous, uncorporatelike, ungovly crimes. My hands are tied. I wish I could help you. I really do. I pity you. That's why I figured the least I can do is answer a few of your most vital, pressing questions before sending you to Hell. You must have many."

"The only question I have for you, Wolfe, is how do you want your ass handed to you? On a platter, or did you want that ass-whooping to go?" Drake sneered.

Wolfe let out a hearty, soul-felt laugh. "One last show of bravado before your soul is sentenced to the oblivion, eh Drake?" His gaze then turned serious as he peered into Drake's eyes. "Drake, I thought you should know something. I was the one who gave the execution order for your father, Kenneth Lively."

What? What did Wolfe just say?

He felt like now he was in a dream. Like time had stopped completely. His own breathing had stopped, and he could hear his heart beating, louder than anything he had ever heard before.

And then…

His world imploded.

The memory…the cloudy, distorted one, like a dream…he could now see in that hazy outline projected from the corpol's holo watch…he could see…Wolfe!

Suddenly everything connected, and he was back in reality, time ticking forward, but his world imploding, now ever faster…

Wolfe!

Oh god! Finally, now, to look into the face of my father's killer! It was him…it was Wolfe all along! The Savior who gave the order to execute my father! The bastard! Now I finally know who was responsible!

And he…

Damn him! Why did he come here now to tell me this?

He must…

He wants to send me to Hell with the eternal knowledge that he was the one who destroyed my life. Drake's face was quivering, the sweat pouring down in his eyes. Vision blurred. Thinking cloudy. But he knew one thing.

Wolfe.

Why did he give me the job as fixer in the first place?

Must.

The sadistic bastard! He enjoys playing with his victims like this.

Die.

Drake found it hard to maintain any semblance of composure. "You…showed…up…here…like this…as a…hologram, to tell me this? Coward!" Flecks of spittle went flying out from Drake's mouth towards the hologram as he shouted. "Why didn't you come here in person?! Why don't you meet me face-to-face, like a man, you detestable little bitch!"

Wolfe laughed again. "Do you really think that you or your father's death are important to me? Your father was nothing but a lunatic Conspiracy Theorist. A complete crackpot, Drake. Trying to get people to go with him to some mythical place that doesn't exist."

The Forest of the Real. The words stung worse than any knife could have. His father. The dreamer. He had been out of touch with reality. Like an adult child, never letting go of that one childhood fantasy of his. And he had lost his life because of it. Drake's father, with his whimsical ideas and fairy tales, had failed. That was why Drake had devoted his life to being practical. The only thing one could do, imprisoned by a society such as this, was not to run away, not to believe in foolish tales, but to sabotage the system. To fight back. He was on the inside. He could have done something. He had had plans. But, he had to admit to himself, that's all they had ever been. Plans. Plans, but no action. Every day thinking I could do this, or I could do that. That's how we can bring the system down. But never doing it. The biting truth was that he had failed. Like his father. He had failed himself. And that devastated him far worse than anything Wolfe could say or do. Of all the people one could blame for their failures, the most painful one to put the blame on was always oneself. He could have done something before now. But, through inaction, he had made his choice. His goals weren't important enough for him to actually do anything about them. He simply hadn't desired them enough. And so, in the final analysis, he had no one to blame but himself.

Wolfe continued. "I do regret we hadn't started sending

souls to Hell back then. I so would love to have old Kenneth's soul around to torture from time to time. But luckily for you, Drake, I'm saving you from your father's fate. Just think, I'm giving you the priceless gift of immortality! You should be thanking me, instead of deriding me."

Drake was speechless, the magnitude of his failure pressing down on him like a mountain. Unable to breathe, unable to do anything under the crushing weight of the complete and total waste his life had amounted to.

The Corporate Savior went on. "Unfortunately, you are guilty of much more than ungovly relations. I know your plans, Drake. You want to kill us. Imagine! A soul so unrepentant and foolish as to want to kill his own Saviors. Bite the hand that feeds him. How did you ever imagine that one such as you could really defeat us? I could have helped you Drake. I could have been your friend. I could have raised you up, given you a special place in our society. Instead, you'll spend an eternity in Hell thinking about your mistakes. Enjoy."

"Wh–But– How? No! I deny it! It's a lie!" How? How was it possible? That confirmed it. The Hacking Tools…they had never worked from day one. Shit!

"Oh shut up, you whining baby. Did you seriously think you could escape us? We know everything! Come on, Drake! The government and the corporations can read the minds of every individual. Nothing is private anymore. Not even a single thought escapes our attention! We have the power ascribed in the primitive holy texts to the Abrahamic god. We search deep into the depths of every heart and mind. Isn't modern technology wonderful? Men have become gods!"

"You're not a god. You're just one pathetic, sick, little demented man. With delusions of grandeur."

Wolfe laughed. "Go ahead and comfort yourself, with your moralistic blubbering. But it's people like me who rule the world. Do you want to know the one, tiny little difference between people like me and people like you, Drake? You may be shocked to hear there is just one. The single, solitary reason why you aren't important enough for me to take the time out of my busy schedule to meet you face-to-face. It's because you, Drake–unlike me–are dispensable. Allow me to let you in on a little interesting fact. Did you know that I am the only Corporate Savior who wasn't born into wealth? That means

any of you peasants—yes, that means you, Drake—could have been me if you had used your brain. All you had to do was learn to be valuable to the right people. That's the difference. That's the only thing separating people like me from people like you. *I* made myself indispensable. ***You***, on the other hand, did not. And that is why I am a Corporate Savior, and you are soon to be nothing but a miserable little soul in Hell."

Drake spit at Wolfe's sneering holo, this time on purpose. "Fuck you! The only people that are dispensable are you and all the rest of the Corporate Saviors! If the human race got rid of all of you sleazebags overnight, we'd be infinitely better off. Nobody needs you! Nobody asked for your salvation. Nobody asked you to manage and gatekeep the work of others. Like the autofactories that make all the food. Did you design them? Did you build them? Did you design and create all the many generations of robotics that led, gradually, step by tiny step to their creation? No! Thousands upon thousands of other people did. So why the fuck do you think they are your property? Same thing with the apartment complexes we live in. You didn't have anything to do with making them either. And yet, you think we all have to prostate ourselves before you and grovel because you've set up a system where you control everyone else's means of survival. And everyone is just too scared or too lazy to speak up about it. Well I'm not! You and this system of slavery you've built can all go to hell!"

Every fiber of his being was tingling. He was going to Hell, but at least he was happy about one thing. Finally…he had done it. He had spoken out against the system. He had done something billions of people failed to do. He had stood up to them. To these deranged psychopaths who think they are gods. And he knew that everything he had said was true. Better to be a dreamer or a failed pragmatist than a psycho like Wolfe, Drake told himself. At least he would never bow down to his masters. He would go down free. He would go down devoted to his ideals, not theirs.

Wolfe chuckled. "Well that was cute. Unfortunately I don't have time to debate a loser who will just be a tiny, insignificant shitstain in history, much less hear his ridiculous theories. But, please keep in mind that everything you are saying and doing at this moment will go on the record and be a determining factor in how much and what kind of mental punishments we

decide to inflict upon your soul in the hereafter. With that in mind, do you wish to make any amendments or changes to that little speech you just gave?"

"Only one. Fuck you, and fuck your system."

"Ah…using a lot of primitive words now aren't we, Drake? Especially ones which refer to the ancient art of putting penises inside vaginas. That ***would*** be on that ungovly little mind of yours right now, wouldn't it? Well, enjoy your last thoughts about that, Drake. Where you are about to go…you won't have any thoughts at all."

Drake lashed out with all his strength against the indestructible, unyielding, pearly shackles, every fiber of his being intent on obliterating the insubstantial image in front of him.

Wolfe, feigning as if he had just remembered something, added, "No thoughts, that is…except one, Drake. Agony." Wolfe let loose a maniacal howl and then abruptly disappeared.

Suddenly, the holojis started flooding the room again. The ghost wearing the green dress was back. They were back online.

"Welcome back, citizens!" The Peter screeched. "I'm so glad you're all still with us and didn't desist during that tiny little commercial break. In fact, I'm happy to report our livestream just hit five million viewers! Our highest viewer count ever! And I'm sure we'll have oodles and oodles of views later. Nobody's gonna wanna miss out on this! The banishing of the most vile, wretched badsoul ever to Hell, and the giving of life to another who deserves it far more!"

He pulled an object out of his robes. A gleaming, gold, oblong gadget that looked sort of like the handle of a laser gun, but with the barrel missing. Instead of a trigger, there was a golden button on top. The Peter had his thumb on the button. Drake recognized that device. The Key of Fate. Along with the Pearly Gate Seat, it was used to send people to Heaven, or to Hell. The AI simply looked at the citizen's Salvation Score to make the decision. A more streamlined, technological system of salvation for the modern age.

"What say you, audience? Shall I be the one to pull the trigger? Or shall I grant Thomas Lively, the badsoul's uncle, his request and let him do the honors?" The Peter was glowing,

beaming ear to ear. Thomas's face was somber, its only emotion one of reverence towards the Corporate Saviors and solemnity on this hallowed occasion.

The Peter continued, "Who votes for me?"

A stream of thumbs-up holojis cascaded up all around them.

"Now, who votes for the badsoul's uncle?"

Suddenly, a virtual tempest of holojis of every kind consumed the room with immaterial, artificial light. Drake could hardly see The Peter and Thomas in front of him, so thick was the holographic outpouring from the invisible audience.

"Very well, then!" The Peter cooed. "Thomas Lively it is!" The cyclone of holojis intensified. Drake was blinded. He couldn't see a thing. He guessed that now the Peter was handing the device to Thomas. Drake braced himself. His uncle was about to do it. About to pull the trigger on his life. Don't do it, uncle! He thought inwardly. But he couldn't bring himself to say it. He couldn't allow Wolfe that last pleasure, of seeing his weakness. He knew Wolfe was still watching, enjoying every second. He wouldn't allow himself to die a coward. He would die with dignity.

He heard a click.

And then, suddenly, everything was gone. The holojis, The Peter, his uncle.

And there was nothing, nothing but…

Darkness.

MEDIATOR'S MEMORIES: BRAIN MELD

My name is Kristal Silverberg. In my mind, I hold the memories of many people. Here is one of them...

Jon the trucker stared into his overpriced cup of healthy, chemical-enriched processed sugar-filled coffee as he waited for his date. He was apprehensive. He scratched his red beard. He lifted up his navy blue baseball cap and wiped a droplet of sweat off his forehead underneath it. This was the first time he had met someone on the BrainMixer app, and if she actually showed up, it would be his first Brain Meld. Would he experience any of the persistent psychological side effects some people reported having after a Brain Meld session gone wrong?

Jon looked up to see Mary, wearing a red muumuu dress—basically all dresses nowadays were muumuus, the only kind of dress that fit modern women—walk through the door of the Starburnt's. Her eyes scanned the room, and then she spotted him. She started walking towards his table. Here she was! Damn it! There was no backing out now. But maybe she would be cute inside the SimWorld in her primitive body. Would have to wait and see.

The corporate-saved woman sat down at the table, seated directly across from him.

"Mary, right?"

"That's me! Jon, right?" She seemed enthusiastic enough. Dark hair and eyes. Dimples. Slightly red in the cheeks.

"Yeah, I'm Jon. Nice to finally meet you. Did you wanna order something first?"

"I'll just grab a coffee real quick."

Jon waited while Mary stood in line and ordered her coffee. He realized how little he knew about this woman. He had just tried out the BrainMixer app for the hell of it. The ancient art of putting penises inside vaginas was illegal, but people could use mind-altering experimental apps like Brain Meld together, and it was one of the most popular things to do on dates, other than meeting in SimWorld, which was the most popular. A lot of couples had met by Brain Melding, and later ended up getting married and having a child through the government

vats. It was the normal, acceptable way of doing things.

Mary returned with her coffee.

"Now tell me again—I forgot—what do you do for a living?" Jon asked.

"Nothing!" Mary said, beaming. "I just sit around and play the sims all day." That's right. Like most people. "What about you?"

"I have a cush job working for our Glorious Government."

"Really? That's amazing! Tell me all about it."

"I drive a hover semi all over the Unsaved Zone. It's far out."

"Wow!!! That is like so totally…fa— like rad."

This was going better than he had expected. She seemed really into him. Jon was about to say something, but then spilled his coffee, which presently started forming a puddle on the table in front of him. Damn it, what an idiot I am, he thought. I'm gonna ruin it! His nervousness was showing. Now she would probably think he was a dork.

"Wait," he said, righting the coffee. "I'm gonna go get some napkins and clean this up. I'll be right back."

"No, I can't wait! Let's Brain Meld now! Clean it up later."

Wow, she's eager to get our consciousnesses all twisted up together. Maybe she really is into me. Okay, then. Let's do this. Please let this session go smoothly, he prayed silently to the Corporate Saviors.

Jon produced a shiny chrome mental cable, plugged it in to one of his xtphn's cervical inputs, and held out the other end to Mary. She jacked in.

"Here goes nothing," he said.

"I'm so excited!" Mary jittered in her seat.

Jon closed his eyes. From his eyelid menu, he focus-clicked "Apps," and then from the next menu, "Brain Meld."

A logo appeared on the back of his eyelids. Just the words "BRAIN MELD" in blue, all caps letters, with some green stuff oozing off them. Real amateur looking. Then, there was a loud "bing!" and a large red rectangle with the white bold words, "Thank you for choosing Brain Meld v0.67889. Warning! Brain Meld is still in beta. Possible side effects include psychosis, split personality disorder, united personality disorder, temporary sensations of superintelligence, and/or becoming a vegetable for the rest of your life. Are you sure you wish to

continue?"

Jon gulped. He could hear Mary squirming in her chair, and the sound of other customers slurping down their healthy processed sugar.

After a slight pause, he focused-clicked the "Okay," button.

The next screen popped up. "You may now open your eyes. Brain Meld starting in ten seconds..."

Jon opened his eyes. He was staring at Mary, her face full of anticipation.

"So, like, how many times have you done this?" Jon asked.

"Well, counting you, this will be...***eight times***." The first part of the sentence was normal, still Mary talking to him. But the "eight times" seemed to Jon to be emanating from himself, like he had said it to himself, inside his mind. He hadn't seen her lips move.

He noticed that Mary and everyone in the joint started to look puddly. People didn't look that separate anymore. Kind of like everyone was made up of juice, and people were swapping with each other.

Wait a minute, why was somebody drinking him? He was in Mary's cup, and she was drinking him through a straw. Whoaa!

Finally, he felt himself being sucked up all the way through the straw. Then he was still staring at the puddly people, but he wasn't sure if it was Jon or Mary in front of him.

"Whoa, Mary! I'm...you! Wait! Who am I? I'm Mary, right Jon? Jon, do you feel the same thing?"

As the puddly people continued their conversation, they all started to look more swirly, as if he were looking at rain drops on a window through a fisheye lens and the drops were running into each other circularly.

"Jon? Wait, Jon? Is that you? I mean Mary?"

The voice was coming from outside his consciousness. Was it her voice? Was it his voice?

He was looking up from the table now. He felt very puddly now. He was a puddle. A puddle of coffee on the table. He could feel the hard slick table under him. Could feel how his body was all liquid and shiny and dark. And the merging rain drops were still in the room all around him. They were liquidy, fleshy rain drops with eyes and mouths and noses. The rain drop people kept merging, kept swapping juices, kept flowing

together into one. All the Starburnt's coffee drinkers were becoming one. Now he could feel Mary in him, part of this coffee puddle that was his consciousness. Actually now everyone in the room was part of the coffee puddle, and they were all lying there, all slack and liquid.

He was at one with the universe.

At one with humanity. Here in this coffee puddle.

So many memories were flooding back to him. (To them?) I remember when I was a little girl, or was I a little boy? I was playing with dolls in the nursery at the government vats.

He remembered his Govly Maker encouraging him to choose his infinasex. He remembered thinking, I was a girl, but now I'm a puck, not a girl. Pucks have no gender.

And now…am I a man, or a woman, or a puck? Do I have a penis, or vagina? Or both? I have both. I remember both, under the folds of my stomach that hang over my genital region. So do pucks have both genitals? Or was he remembering both Mary and Jon's genitals, hidden under their bellies, viewable in the mirror? Or maybe he (she? puckself?) had a nongina, or a nonis, or a nongenis.

Wow, this was some trippy shit.

Suddenly Jon said, "Hey Jon, tell me how you are experiencing it."

Mary replied, "Hey Mary, wait…I'm Jon, why did you call me Mary?"

Jon said, "I didn't call you Mary."

"No, he didn't. I did. I called Mary Jon, Mary."

What was he now? What was he wearing now? Was I always wearing this dress?

Yes, he was wearing a red muumuu, staring into the coffee puddle that contained the consciousnesses of every living being on the planet, all merged into one. No hate, no envy, no division. This was paradise, this puddle.

As he, or she, or whatever it was, stared into the puddle on the table, puck thought to puckself. I can see both parts of myself inside this coffee puddle…the male part, and the female part. Isn't it great being whole? Having both sides of myself? I remember when I was only half, only one part. First, I was the male part only; then later I was only the female part. Or wait, did I get those two reversed?

For a long time, puck basked in the reverie, basked in the ecstatic joy of losing puckself's identity, puck's ego shell having been broken, and puck's ego flowing out to join all other egos in the universe to form one massive, formless, divisionless consciousness.

Then suddenly, puck said to puckself…Wait, why does this Starburnt's seem inside out? We're on the outside, which is like a small planet, bristling with tables and chairs sticking out like the spikes of a porcupine. And all the tables have coffee puddles, and on all the chairs there are flesh-colored puddles, and those puddles are people. And on the inside of the Starburnt's, which I can't see, I can sense the managers and employees all a tangled-up mess inside the bathroom with all their coffee machines. But they are enjoying it, their egos mixing, breaking down the barriers between them. But at least we have a giant parasol on the outside to protect us from the gigantic sun looming nearer and nearer. We'll all become one with the Sun, with its gases, with its heat…

Wait! We're gonna get burnt! Burnt coffee, that's what we'll be! I need to ask those humans looming over me to hurry and clean me up, and put me back in my Starburnt's coffee cup!

But suddenly he was all the consciousnesses in the universe and he was floating in the sky. I'm expanding, getting bigger, he thought to himself. This is weird, he thought. I'm Jon, but at the same time I'm Mary, and at the same time we are all the consciousnesses in the universe and we live inside the Sun, which is me now, my body. And I'm getting bigger and bigger… expanding outward. I'm about to run into that small, tiny little Starburnt's franchise and burn it up. I'm glad we transferred all our consciousnesses into this hot ball of gas. It would have been horrible to be alive in that tiny, gigantic fat Jon body while it was burned to a crisp.

Wait!!!! I just realized, I need to go to work right after this!! How am I going to go to work if I'm a supernova? I'm gonna need to call in sick…

CHAPTER 11: KRISTAL AND THE SAVIOR

Kristal sat down in the mental chair, and the mental nurse strapped her in. “I’ll leave you in the Meadow, and the mentist will be in in a moment, okay?”

“Okay,” Kristal replied. The white cerebral bubble whirred down, consuming her head.

Suddenly she was standing in the Meadow in her amazingly beautiful and slender primitive form, next to a huge oak tree. Above the oak tree there shone the illustrious yellow sun in the azure blue sky of this virtual world, so unlike the grey, lifeless sky of the real world. She began to trudge along through the clovers, startled white rabbits darting out of her way. She knew that this place was called MentWorld. A private, offline version of SimWorld, where you could explore while waiting for the mentist to do their work on your brain. She had spent more time here than she cared to think about.

She groaned inwardly. Back here ***again***? Why did they continuously need her to do these mental checkups? Drake had fixed her repressed memory, the first Reality Fixer who had been able to do so. But then she had stolen all of Drake’s memories. So now she had the Reality Fixer’s memory of fixing her memory. Which also meant that she knew from Drake’s memory of reading her file the real fate of her mother, not that lie the Department of Thought Management had cooked up.

So now, knowing all that Drake knew, the repressed memory of her mother masturbating had broken through once more, and she had both memories—her mother’s “sin,” and her mother being awarded by the Saviors and sent on a top secret mission.

Now she remembered the terrifying truth about her mother…and yet, somehow she had always known…

Oh god.

They sent her to Hell.

The Corporate Saviors. Those bastards!

She had watched on that horrible show as her mother sat in the Pearly Gate Seat. They had erased that memory, along with the one of her mother masturbating, and yet both memories kept coming back…and they kept erasing them. Back and forth, back and forth. She remembered, and then she didn’t remember. It was like she was two different people…the one that remembered the awful truth about her mother, and

the one that believed in the rosy lies of the Saviors, that her mother had been hailed as a hero...

And yet, while her mother continued on in eternal agony, a digital vessel of wrath being tortured by the Saviors at this very moment, she had decided to live, to advance, in their society, anyways. It was the hardest decision she had ever made. But what other choice did she have? And every time she praised the Corporate Saviors, every time she obeyed them, she felt the guilt, the pain, like she was feeding the fires of her mother's excruciation. Like she was crucifying her, with every step that she took, every day that she lived. And yet, she knew there wasn't any other way. And now she was working directly for her mother's tormentors, spreading their gospel, hiding their sins. Forgive me, mother. There's no other way. It's what I have to do.

She was pretty sure that with the MindLink Hacking Tools she had taken from Drake, now they couldn't see her ungovly memories. She had activated the amazing tool ThoughtCloak. So they shouldn't know about her stealing Drake's memories and the repressed memory breaking back through. So why did she have to go back in now? Couldn't they just leave her alone?

Suddenly, she was no longer in the Meadow. She was sitting at a table, surrounded by her govlymates from Govly Academy. Her Govly Maker, a huge woman with a bright purple bob hairdo and black horn-rimmed glasses, walked in, carrying a large birthday cake. On top, there sat six candles. Her sixth birthday! Her Govly-Maker set the cake down in front of her, as her govlymates cheered her on to blow out the candles.

Huh? What happened to the Meadow? Why was she reliving her sixth birthday? This felt like something they did when they sent a fixer in after her. But why would they send another fixer? Drake had already fixed her memory. And with the Hacking Tools, they shouldn't know about her finding out about the repressed memory.

Wait, she thought. I can feel it. She felt the presence of someone exploring her MindWorld. Like a fixer. But, it didn't feel like any fixer she had known before. It felt...much more powerful. She had never felt anything like this before. But she was getting better at this. She knew what to do.

She had stumbled upon her powers by accident. First,

there was the realization that their equipment had less power over her than over other people. When she went to the mentist, erased memories would come back, not long after being erased. Then, while MindLinking she had caught glimpses of other people's memories, which she knew she hadn't experienced, and they hadn't shared with her. The mind-to-mind barrier was weak. The first few times she had broken through to people's MindWorld she hadn't stolen any memories. At first, she had thought it was not her, but a malfunction of the machines. But after a while she decided to try and experiment with it. And the more she experimented, the more she realized her powers were growing. This was no malfunction, no fluke. She had come to the gradual realization that she had special mental powers that other people didn't have. And the first time she had done it…the first time she had stolen all of someone else's memories, she couldn't sleep for days. Just reliving that man's life over and over in her mind. The ability to be someone else…to live their entire life, to have their memories, was exhilarating. And addicting. So she had done it several more times. And now, with Drake…

She now had memories of all the government reports Drake had read. They seemed to think her powers were genetic but that they didn't manifest until adulthood.

But how did they know that for sure? What if she had had these powers her whole life and just not known about them? How many people have latent abilities but never discover them, go their whole lives unaware of their own talents, unaware of their own unique abilities? What if Shakespeare had never tried his hand at writing? He would have died thinking he was like everyone else. No individual comes with their own instruction manual. And if they listen to others, listen to society…definitely they will never know their own power. No one else had ever told her about her talent. She had to discover it on her own. The first time it happened it had seemed like sheer coincidence. And thereafter she had begun experimenting, testing, learning what she could do. How many people have latent abilities that they never discover, because they never experiment, never try new things, never try their own abilities, and instead only do what others, what society tells them to do?

No one had ever encouraged her to be a Reality Mediator.

And certainly no one had ever told her to experiment with her powers. The key to success, she decided, was to ignore what society, and what everyone around you tells you to do, and instead, do what ***you*** want to do.

Sensing the presence invading her mind, and feeling her powers growing, she decided to go straight to the presence's Forest of Memories. She concentrated, feeling the presence's power, feeling the outline of the mind touching hers.

What the? Was this…? Yes! She couldn't believe it. The mind invading hers was a Corporate Savior!

How strange..did they also do fixing work? She couldn't imagine Corporate Saviors moonlighting as fixers.

Then it hit her. This might be the perfect opportunity. How much better could she ingratiate herself into the Corporate Saviors' inner circle than by knowing their most intimate thoughts and memories? If this really was what she thought it was, she was sitting on a gold mine. She had to get in there. She had to see what was there, get at all those many, many secrets that no doubt lay inside. Talk about really investigating. Going directly to the source. From now on, she would know what they talk about when they are together, she would know what makes them tick. And with that knowledge, how much easier would it be to get them to let her in the club?

Yes! National Reality Mediation, here I come!

But that thought immediately caused her to have pangs of guilt. She realized she would be betraying her mother. Maybe not betraying her, she told herself. Maybe finding an opportunity to set things right…

Focus, Kristal. I need to slip into this mind while I have a chance. I'm getting good at this. I know what I'm doing. She could feel the personality drawing her in. She could feel herself oozing into it.

Ah, yes, here we go…

Suddenly, she was no longer at her sixth birthday, no longer surrounded by her govlymates. Perfect! She was in!

She stood in a forest. Yes, I'm in his Forest of Memories, she thought. It was night. Trees stood around her in the darkness. She could hear chaotic noises, could see a bright light from a clearing up ahead. She walked forward. Soon, she had made it to the clearing.

She looked around, and all she could see was…

An absolute nightmare.

Plumes of smoke rising from the simple huts…everything ablaze…soldiers killing, shooting, maiming, laughing…

And the Asian women…the soldiers were doing things to them…vaguely like the things she had done with Drake, except…they were doing other things, too. Torture. Butchery. Unimaginable, horrible acts of violence, all with looks of glee and elation on the soldiers faces, as they brutalized the blood-caked, dirt-covered, abused naked bodies. And the look on the women's faces were ones of anguish and pure terror.

She looked down and saw a pile of bodies at her feet.

Children.

Children's corpses.

The look of terror frozen onto their faces. The blood flowing from their small, twisted bodies.

All around her…fire, murder, and ash.

It was the most horrific thing she had ever seen in her life. She wanted to get away. She wanted out of this forest, out of this mind.

But then suddenly, it happened.

The floodgates of memories broke in on her.

The memories rushed in, all at once, thousands upon thousands of them. Her mind was filled with the inexplicable horror that was this mind she was imbibing. This mind…this beast, this monster.

Visions of hell, visions of madness and cruelty.

The legions of remembrances exploded in on her, crushing her mind under the weight of their depravity, the weight of a thousand nightmares all rolled into one.

Oh god! She screamed out. Let me out of this place! But she was powerless to do anything as the invading mind rushed in to hers, crushing her soul. Her psyche, her very self was collapsing under the weight of extreme mental torture.

It was more than she could handle.

Suddenly, her mind shut down.

Wolfe logged out from the Reality Cube. He had broken into a cold sweat. He sat at the desk in a small white room in the Rosewood Mental Clinic.

A few feet away from him, Kristal Silverberg's plump body rested in the mental chair, arms and legs restrained, her head consumed by the white cerebral bubble. He could feel the perspiration marks on his toga. He unplugged the mental cable from his intphn. Corporate Saviors had no xtphns, their intphns being a special, ultra high-tech variety that could do everything on its own. His intphn had a single port at the base of his skull—the port where normal citizens would have plugged their xtphn into their intphn.

He removed the laurels from the top of his head and ran his fingers through his platinum hair.

Nothing had ever happened to him like that. She had invaded his mind. She had crossed the interpersonal barrier, like it wasn't even there. They had built safeguards in to prevent anything like that from happening.

A brain-machine-brain interface can be a very dangerous thing, if not designed and managed properly. Human minds simply hadn't been designed to interface directly with one another.

But there she was. In his mind. In his soul.

Dr. Serelli, the blonde blobular mentist stood nearby, watching. She had gotten back from maternity leave. "Is everything alright, your Corporateness?"

For a Corporate Savior to visit a mental clinic was rare indeed. But for one to plug into a Reality Cube and fix a patient was almost unheard of. He would remove the memory of his visit from the minds of everyone here today, mentist and nurse alike. They didn't need to know that there was something so concerning that a Savior had needed to come here himself.

Still, he had come here wearing his full-body, holographic fatsuit, anyways. If a lardass saw his body in real life, they would no doubt go into shock. None of them knew the Corporate Saviors actually had primitive bodies in real life. The fatsuit moved in sync with his body and face and mouth, fooling the untrained eye to really see him in his fat form.

"Everything's fine." He stood up, putting his laurels back on. "I need to go." He staggered towards the door. Having your

mind invaded like that was disorienting. He felt in his pocket and gripped it. The size of a pen, a special device that, with a tiny, undetectable prick, took a DNA sample. He and his fellow Corporate Saviors would always keep one leg up on the competition, technologically, physically, and yes, even genetically. He already had what he wanted from her. Her genetic code. Thus, whatever advantages her genes proved to have, they would soon belong to him and the rest of the Corporate Saviors. With gene splicing, they could be easily snipped and added into their posterity's DNA.

"What should I do about the patient, my Savior?"

"She's incurable. Lobotomize her."

DIARY OF THE UNSAVED: CYBERSURGERY

The young man sat in his hut. He had lost a ton of weight. He was skinny now. Not in perfect shape, but skinny. He looked like a new man. He felt the back of his neck. The scar was healing much better now.

There was a fugitive cybersurgeon who had brought his equipment with him, who offered to remove intphns for free from all who wanted to. It felt so good to finally be rid of his smartphone. Wahoo! He was smartphone-free! No longer was there any trace of his previous slavery to his Corporate Saviors except the scar healing nicely on the back of his neck. It felt so good to be able to live in real reality with real people, not 24/7 in mediated reality interacting with mediated people.

He was also helping out with freeing people now. Since he had proven his abilities, and had even gotten good with a firearm, they had asked him if he wanted to, and he agreed. It was all on a volunteer basis, of course. No one was forced to. But he wanted to. He took pleasure in freeing more people from the chains of their Corporate Saviors.

He grabbed his diary and began writing:

This is really important, because many people think that living in the wilderness without venditors and their pills and hospitals you'd be at risk and die because of disease etc., when in fact the exact opposite is true.

In reality, living in nature forces you to be ten—no, a hundred times—healthier. The Saved think in order to be healthy you need venditors, pills and hospitals. But in reality you just need three simple things that no one in the Corporate Zone gets (which is why they are so unhealthy). Exercise, sleep, and a healthy diet. They don't exercise, because they are in the sims all day. They don't have a healthy diet, because they eat corporate food. And their sleep is disturbed because of the other two. Chemical-filled, processed food and sugar addictions make it harder for your body to sleep peacefully and fully, as does lack of exercise. And spending too much time in the sims unnaturally stimulates the brain, is addictive, and many people

develop sleep disorders because of them.

Corporate Society creates all of its own problems and never solves them. First, Corporations, by creating toxic, processed food, create the health problems they claim their magic pills solve. Likewise, Corporate man is chasing his tail around, creating all his own health problems by lack of sleep, exercise, and healthy food, and then turning around and asking the corporations for magic pills to solve the problems that he and they created together. One big vicious cycle of insanity.

The Unsaved—just like primitive athletes and Olympic medalists—almost never get sick. And for those extremely rare times when they do, they are all skilled in the use of diet and herbs to detox and heal their bodies.

As for injuries, while the Saved are skilless, the Unsaved each are highly skilled in dozens of areas. There are many highly trained medics who know how to set bones and care for injured people and even do physical therapy in extreme cases. And there are people highly trained in delivering babies. As for surgeons that know how to do a triple bypass surgery… they don't need any, because no one here eats McTriple Bypass Burgers!

Turning your back on Corporations doesn't mean going into the Dark Ages. It means the exact opposite. These are the healthiest, most intelligent, and most skilled people I have ever met. I would much rather trust my life with a medic here than with a venditor or even surgeon in the Corporate Zone. By comparison, the Saved, on average, are the unhealthiest, least skilled, least intelligent people I know. The Corporate Saviors have succeeded in dumbing down and devolving humanity.

The future of humanity lies not in the Corporate Zone, but here. It is here that humans are getting better, not worse. It is here that humanity moves forward, with all the knowledge of the ages at our fingertips, and no toxic Corporate Society culture to stop us from living life to its fullest.

CHAPTER 12: AWAKENING

The hover semi-trailer wound its way through the Northwest Unsaved Zone, floating on a cushion of air, passing scenic vistas of row after row of evergreen trees as the sun made its descent, preparing to dip below the nearby snow-capped mountain. Jon the truck driver took his hands off the steering wheel for just a moment to adjust his navy blue cap. Although his lips weren't moving, he was having a conversation in his mind using the xtphn wrapped around his neck.

"Thanks to my venditor I know not to believe in those dangerous Conspiracy Theories online about how what you eat might be the cause of your health problems and how you should eat natural, unprocessed food from Mother Nature instead of the holy Manna from our Corporate Saviors and their factories. He assured me that the food manufactured by FattyChemCo and McArtificial's is totally healthy, and they aren't involved in some kind of crazy plot to give me indigestion, and he told me that those articles on the Net claiming that corporate food can give you indigestion and other health problems including diabetes and heart disease are totally unscientific. I trust the Science. Who knows how those websites dodged the censorbots, but whoever made them are terrorists and our Glorious Government oughtta painlessly end them sonsabitches."

Someone was squawking on the other end of his brain call.

"Yeah, yeah. Exactly. Turns out my venditor learned at Viktimstein Medical Academy—it's named after Viktimstein because they receive large grants from Viktimstein's company MagicPillCo—that the real scientific cause of every illness is not improper diet, exercise, and sleep, but things called "disorders," and the cure to every disorder under the sun is to take an expensive prescription drug made by MagicPillCo for the rest of your life. No, no, no! Neither he nor his company influence what they teach at all, that's another one of those evil Conspiracy Theories! That rich people do things to their own benefit! Imagine! Anyways, my indigestion wasn't caused by corporate food like those crazy Conspiracy Theorist quacks claimed; it was caused by a really scientific-sounding medical thing called 'Irritable Bowel Syndrome,' and my venditor gave me the real cure: a lifelong prescription to a Magic Pill."

More squawking inside his brain.

"What? Are you cuckoo? No, of course the cure doesn't cure

anything! Magic Pills don't cure anything. That's why you have to take them for the rest of your life! Manage symptoms. Are you a dummy? Look, the venditors learn all about it at that academy. About how getting repeat business makes the corporation richer, or some other medical jargon like that. If you want a better explanation, go talk to your venditor. I'm just a normal everyday guy, so I do what the venditor tells me. Anyways, let me get back to the story. So I started taking the Magic Pill he prescribed me, but then it started giving me headaches, so I went back to my trusty venditor. He said headaches are a known side effect of that pill, so he prescribed me another pill to take care of the headaches, but then that pill caused drowsiness as a side effect, so he prescribed me yet another pill for the drowsiness. Long story short, now I'm up to the recommended minimum of ten different Magic Pill prescription drugs per day that each citizen needs in order to be healthy. And to make the Corporations a lot of money. But now I recently started having brain fogs, and I'm thinking that must be another side effect too, so I'm gonna ask my venditor to sell me another Magic Pill to take care of the brain fog. Thank Government for our Corporate Saviors and their healthy processed food and life-saving Magic Pills! My life would be so much worse without them... Hey, wait a minute, I'm having another one of the brain fogs...oh shit, what am I doing? Where am I? Why am I holding a steering wheel in my hands all of the sudden? Oh fuuuuuucck!"

The hover semi went off the road and skidded out and then dove into a roll...rolling, rolling, rolling, killing its driver in the acrobatic rolling process, its cargo area's door flinging open, skidding, rolling, skidding, rolling, so acrobatic, and finally stopping, coming to rest on its side.

Its cargo had spilled out in the process.

A bunch of large jellyfish-like podsacs, all over unsaved, uncorporate, natural Mother Earth.

Blackness.

Darkness.

All around.

No light. No sound.

Nothingness.

Mu.

The light of awareness…off. So comfortable, drifting in nothing…

But suddenly awareness flickered on. Why?

The nothingness smoothly faded into a sense of being, a sense of existing. Not nothing.

So strange-feeling in here…Feels liquid…Feels like floating. Floating free…like an amoeba.

Perhaps he had retrogressed through millions of years of evolution and become an amoeba. So slick and weird and sensationless.

Suddenly, a tiny, muffled sound in the background…

What's going on here? I feel like I'm tumbling, but no direction is up. Is this how an amoeba feels?

More muffled background sounds, reverberating through the liquid all around. Whales? Maybe they were humpback whales. Maybe he was a fish, back before fish had eyes, and he was floating in the ocean, listening to the strange, extraterrestrial songs of the whales. Or maybe he had been sent all the way back to the primordial soup. He didn't feel like a fish. He felt so simple. He was one. One cell.

Here I am. An amoeba. Or maybe a protozoa. A one-celled organism. So this is how the simple life feels. But how can I still think? What do single-celled organisms think about? I need to focus on how to be a single-celled organism, if I am to get along now. This is my fate, my destiny.

The whale-shouts continued. But they were getting louder and more violent. Whoa! Suddenly a fast moving feeling…still floating, tumbling, turning through the liquid, but now a quick moving feeling on top of that.

And suddenly some real sounds. Not ocean sounds. His world was being torn into, rent apart. The ocean was being invaded. How could he, an amoeba, survive? He was new to this. He didn't know how to survive as only one cell.

And then suddenly, he felt something.

Air.

Suddenly he was gasping for air.

He had lungs.

The water around him was disappearing, melting away. He violently coughed, sucked in air, vomited out something. Kept sucking in air, fighting to stay alive. Fighting to fill his lungs.

Now his skin was exposed to the cool air, the comfortable water spilling away.

He was naked and cold.

But wait—the water. It wasn't water. It was some kind of gel. His bare skin was covered with ooey, gooey gel.

Breathing regularly now. The cold, dark air. But still no sight. Still the black nothingness.

Am I blind?

Suddenly, soft, blurry lights began to appear.

He was laying somewhere, somewhere slick and covered with gel. He could feel his body now.

He sat up.

Dazed and confused, he stared at the out-of-focus lights. He could hear sounds. Crackling. Popping. A fire.

Suddenly the forms began to coalesce. He was looking at something...something on fire. Something large, horizontal.

He rolled his large body over onto his hands and knees. A slick, strange ground, gel oozing all around. And then, with great effort, he got to his feet. He had to stabilize himself, concentrate, not to slip on the slick, gel-covered ground.

It was dark all around, except the burning object. What was that? It appeared to be a truck. One of those really large ones. Lying on its side, on the ground, ablaze.

His night vision began to slowly kick in. Now he could see millions of swirling stars in the sky, and the tops of trees. Evergreens.

He took a few steps, and something crunched below his bare feet. Dirt, evergreen needles, and pine cones below. He looked down at where he had been. Some sort of sac, torn open, the gel inside having flowed out onto the ground. And then he noticed more sacs, near the truck. He walked towards the truck. A navy blue baseball cap lay on the ground. And not far from the cap, a body lay, unmoving. Red beard. Eyes fixed, staring ahead. Dead.

Naked, cold, the wind biting into his flesh, he instinctively took the clothes off the body and put them on, including the tall, sturdy workboots. He started to walk towards the other sacs lying near the truck.

Suddenly, the truck exploded. He was thrown to the ground.

After he got up, he inched closer to the wreckage.

Broken pods.

Dead bodies.

Carnage.

Need to get out of here.

He realized he was standing on a road. He started walking away from the truck, in the direction it must have been going, based on where it had thrown him.

As he walked down the road, it seemed like he could make out something far ahead over the tops of the evergreens. A bright light. A spotlight. A lookout tower? As he moved closer, he could see the gleam in the night of a high fence.

As he walked towards the light, he remembered.

He wasn't an amoeba.

He was Blayze.

As the inventor lay face-down on the operating table, he thought back to how he had found the answer to his daydreaming problem. Had it been one of the dreams? It had to have been. What else could explain that experience? How ironic that in one of the very daydreams itself he should find the answer. But, if that was only a dream…how had it given him the correct answer, the solution to solving the disorder? Well, dreams are communications from the unconscious to the conscious, he reminded himself. As a cyberneurologist, he had a lifetime study not only of neuroscience and cybernetics, but also psychology to refer back to. Yes, that's it, he assured himself. It must have been my own unconscious sending me a message. It couldn't have actually been from…

Unfortunately, the problem had turned out to be not only software related. There were specific points of connection which also were problematic. Hence the need to undergo surgery. In fact, it was the expanded connections of his own abnormally intelligent brain which had been the cause of the disorder. Hook his invention up to anyone less intelligent than he, and this wouldn't happen. That's why they hadn't caught it in the test group.

But now, he had solved the riddle.

Finally.

He was sure this procedure—a relatively straightforward one—would resolve the issue. And all the kinks having been worked out, his boss would be off his case. Now they could move forward with mass production of MindLink.

The sound of someone's voice pulled him out of his reverie. The cyberneurosurgeon was saying something to him through his surgical mask. What was that? There was something strange about the muffled voice. It had sounded almost like… an automaton. He was about to ask the surgeon to repeat himself, but then all of the sudden he noticed something bizarre.

What in the…?

There was a long cable jutting out of the back of the surgeon's neck, and it ran all the way up to the ceiling.

Then he noticed that the assistants and nurses also had

similar cables, also running up to the ceiling. Colored lights pulsing, throbbing, up up up, from neck to ceiling. Flowing rainbows, dancing up along the wires. Huh?

He had a strange urge to feel the back of his neck. He reached up, and…

Shit!

There was a fat cable coming out of the back of his neck! He tried to pull it out, but it wouldn't budge. What was it connected to? He tried running his hand up the length of the cable. It didn't stop.

Then he realized something. The surgeon, his assistants, and the nurses. Their movements. They weren't natural. They were jerky. As if they were robots.

Fear overtook him. Were they even human? He couldn't let these things operate on him! In one fluid motion, he swung his legs around, off the operating table, and with his arms pushed himself into a standing position. He tried to run towards a nearby door, but soon discovered that he couldn't. That damned cable on the back of his neck was holding him back! He was tethered in place.

But then, he noticed his hands and arms starting to move on their own accord. What the?

He was…

Popping and locking…??

His arms were doing the wave, smoothly and mechanically. His body was moving like a robot.

"Hey brother!" said the surgeon, and this time he understood the voice. "Look! Your cord leads all the way outdoors. Looks like you need to go outside!"

The inventor glanced back, over his shoulder. The surgeon was right. His cord seemed to lead out of the operating room, but in the opposite direction of the way he had tried to run.

On their own accord, without any of his doing, the inventor's hand waved robotically at the medical staff and then his feet began stylishly moonwalking, going backwards, following the cord, out of the operating room.

What in the fuck is my body doing?

He willed himself to stop moonwalking.

But it was no use.

As hard as he tried, he couldn't control his own body. All on

its own, it moonwalked smoothly and professionally down the hall, past the reception desk, and towards the main entrance of the hospital, waiving in its mechanical way to nurses, doctors, and hospital staff on the way. Far from being shocked at the strange appearance of a moonwalking man being pulled by a cable attached to his neck out of the hospital, they all smiled and waived back. Their expressions and movements also looked jerky and robotic, like everybody else's. Some of the hospital staff, including a janitor, were even popping and locking themselves.

Now he could hear a throbbing. Some kind of music spilling in from outside.

He kept moonwalking, out the main hospital entrance and through the parking lot. Soon he found himself in the middle of the street.

He wasn't alone.

All around him, citizens were dancing robotically, each with their own cable sticking out of the back of their neck.

Colored lights.

Pulsing.

Throbbing.

Up, up, up.

Flowing rainbows…

As his eyes traced the cables, he had to lift his head up.

And up.

And up.

Oh, fuck.

Towering above the citizens, their heads high in the sky, were the Corporate Saviors, arrayed in their silver togas and golden laurels. Fearsome. Gargantuan. Colossal. They roved through the city like titans, tall as skyscrapers. Each time one of their golden-sandalled feet touched the ground, the city reverberated as if it were an earthquake. On their faces were plastered huge smiles. And in their hands they held…

Communications towers?

To the towers clutched in the Saviors' hands were attached all of the myriad of cables which flowed upwards to the sky.

The citizens' cables.

Thousands upon thousands of them, each one connected to a citizen, each one flowing up into the sky, into the towers

in the Saviors' hands.

Colored lights.

Pulsing.

Throbbing.

Up, up, up.

Rainbows of data, flowing from the citizens below up to their masters above.

Oh god…

I need out.

Get me out!

He twisted his head, looking this way and that.

Hellish.

Revolting.

He wanted to wretch.

In every direction, as far as the eye could see…

Huge throngs of people, all with cables attached.

And looming above them all, the Corporate Saviors looked down upon the multitudes below with fiendish glee, their heads surrounded by a swirling mass of grey clouds.

The puppet masters.

And the puppets.

Was this the fate of society? Was this the fate of his invention? To be used to hand over the reins of humanity to a group of power-hungry individuals who wanted control over every living being? To turn every human into nothing more than a cybernetic puppet?

From every direction, an electronic tune was being pumped out of huge loudspeakers from the tops of buildings.

The tune of the Corporate Saviors.

Thousands upon thousands of citizens, all dancing robotically. All of society. Shaking to the loudspeakers, moving to the rhythm.

He wanted out. He wanted to run. To get away. To be anywhere but here. But he found his body moving of its own accord.

He began to dance.

Popping and locking.

Popping and locking.

Dance, little robot, dance.

CHAPTER 13: THE FACILITY

“Welcome to–Wecome– Welc– Wel–Welcome–Welcome to–Reinitiating–Welcome– Welcome–”

A war was going on in her head. The voice kept replaying over and over. Binging here and there with robotic chimes and the metallic female voice. “Wellllll……commme…..to…”

And from time to time, brief glimpses of a woman, bathed in light from behind. As if from a dream. A primitive woman, a beautiful woman, almost too perfect…with long, shiny blonde hair. Her face, barely distinguishable in the shadow, seemed too symmetrical, too flawless, like a fantasy.

“Wellllll…..

A flash of the dream woman.

“C–c–c–commmmm–

The woman was reaching out to her.

“Wel–wel–

The clear blue eyes.

“Commmmmm..mmm….mm..

The perfect nose and chin.

“To–”

Finally, the voice went away, and all the images went away.

What had happened?

It was like a nightmare, a struggle, like someone trying to take over her mind. But the struggle was over, and she lay on a bunk in the strange padded cell, all alone.

God! It felt like she had a hangover from hell. But she knew that she hadn’t been drinking. She had faint memories of hearing voices in the distance, and feeling as if she had been floating. A dark, surreal memory of drifting, weightless, and moving…

And then she remembered.

She had invaded a mind. A mind that was too much for her to take. The mind of a monster.

Throughout her entire life, her psychic structure had been carefully shepherded over by the Corporate Saviors, who, as in all totalitarian societies, kept their subjects in a state of childish ignorance and naïveté. Unaware of the realities of life, like infants they clung to their father figure, the State, the monopoly of violence, for protection. Hence, Kristal had never seen a murder, never seen a rape, never seen war. All these realities had been shielded from her view, and, though

physically an adult, in many ways she had mentally been a child. Innocent, but also unable to make life decisions for herself, unable to function in the real world, floating in the artificial bubble the Saviors had created for her. Eternally dependent on her Saviors, not only for food and shelter, but also to shield her from the harsh realities of existence.

Now, in one swift instance, she had broken through the bubble, through the cage her Corporate Saviors had prepared for her. Many corporate citizens long for that cage. Like a chicken who doesn't run away from its coop, because there it always knows there will be food and shelter, the totalitarian subject loves his masters as a dog loves his owner. But now, she had been plucked out of the walled garden of Corporate eden. In one instant, she had gone from being a mental child to being a mental adult. And her mind had shut down, collapsing in on itself, from the shock. It had simply refused to work. She had lost consciousness.

And now…all this.

Still feeling like hell, she looked around. It was a strange room. The tiny cell reminded her of a mental clinic in its immaculate sterility, except here everything was grey and padded.

There was an abrupt sound and the cell door swung open. A silver-bearded man walked in, wearing grey military garb, decorated with ribbons and epaulets. His weathered face, with those intense eyes, bore the features of a psychopath. On either side of him, two guards, donning black boots and all-black uniforms with a patch over the right breast with a strange logo. She squinted. It appeared to be nine brains, arranged in a tic-tac-toe pattern, connected by lightning bolts. On each guard's shoulder she made out the silver letters, "MGSC."

Her still groggy mind tried to connect the logo, the letters, or the face of the silver-bearded man with anything from her memories, either her own or stolen. It all seemed vaguely familiar, but she couldn't pin anything down. She was swimming in a foggy sea of memories. Her own, Drake's, that horrible monster's, and the ones that came before. It wasn't easy, carrying around the memories of so many people. Sometimes it felt like her brain would burst from trying to hold all those memories crammed into only one head.

The silver-bearded man turned to one of the guards and spoke. “Disconnect her.”

The guard closed his eyes, accessing his Eyelid Menu, no doubt. He opened his eyes. “Disconnected, sir!”

Disconnected? Disconnected from what? From that system that was trying to take over her brain a while ago? Perhaps they thought she was still connected to it.

The general spoke again. “Citizen Silverberg, I am General Wagstaffe. I’ve temporarily disconnected you from our system in hopes that you will become a willing and enthusiastic member of our cutting-edge community of the future—of your own choice, of course.”

Of her own choice? She hadn’t been brought here of her own choice…What was the old geezer going on about?

The general cleared his throat and continued. “Citizen Silverberg, Savior Wolfe told me about you. He said to take especial care of you. You will be treated like a VIP here. You are now free to move about the facility as you choose. Don’t think of this facility as a prison. Your being placed here is not punishment. On the contrary, you have been selected as one of the few lucky enough to be part of the glorious future of our civilization. You see, this state-of-the-art test community will serve as a prototype for all communities in the future. The wonders of such an organized, harmonious, peaceful, safe, and ideal community are only made possible by the newest, most cutting-edge technology in Corporate Citizenry. You will be one of those fortunate souls who helps usher in the long-awaited utopia promised by our Saviors!” He had a gleam in his eye as through his corporatespeak he worked his way up into a religious fervor.

He went on. “Again, you are a free woman. I encourage you to do as you please. Please, take advantage of the cafeteria, which is out this door to your right, and if you take the exit on the left, you’ll be able to get some fresh air and enjoy time with other citizens here in our wonderful community.”

Finally, she spoke up. “You said you want me to choose to be part of this community on my own. If that’s the case, then I want to be taken back. I didn’t choose to come here.”

“Please be grateful, Citizen Silverberg; you have been selected out of many, many applicants to be one of the first to

test the new model of society. The most convenient, safe, and orderly society in the history of mankind. I am confident you will find it to your liking. We'll explain more as we go. For now, we're a bit understaffed, so unfortunately, I have other things I must attend to."

Cloudy memories had begun percolating back, slowly, gradually, into her addled brain. Grasping at the disparate memories and connecting them together, she decided to take a gamble.

She decided to bluff.

Or maybe it wasn't a bluff. She wasn't sure yet.

"I know all about this place. I know your plans. You can't do this to me! I'm going to get out and tell everyone about this place. I was connected to Corporate Savior Ron Wolfe's mind and I have all of his memories! I'll tell the whole world about—"

Oh, shit. In her befuddled state she had said too much. It would have been better to not mention any stolen memories, anything about her powers. Plus, she had just threatened a Corporate Savior. Damn it! What the hell was she thinking? But it was too late. She had already opened her big mouth and put her foot in. Shit! She lamented. I'm really fucked, now.

"That's precisely why we won't be letting you out of this facility, Citizen Silverberg. If you think you can get out of here on your own, good luck. Ergo, enjoy being a VIP here at our special community. We'll be keeping an eye on you, Kristal. I am looking ***especially*** forward to the results of this experiment." He looked for a moment wistfully at Kristal, as if he longed to do more.

Something about the way he had said that last part creeped her out. He looked like a man well acquainted with torture. Damn it! What had she gotten herself into? She could only hope Wolfe had told him to take it easy on her. But then, why would he? She had just stolen his memories. To the guard, Wagstaffe ordered, "Connect her."

"Yes, sir!" The guard again closed his eyes and did something.

Suddenly, the robotic voice and flashes of the mysterious lady started back up again.

"She's connected, sir."

"Excellent. You are free, Citizen, to move about on the

premises as you wish. I shall leave this door open. Enjoy being part of the future!" The general and the guards exited the room.

Her mind was once against struggling to break free of the system.

"Welcom-welcom-wel-ww....."

After a time, the voice and images once again died down, as before.

Free at last.

Well, as free as one can be in a cell.

She lay for a time unthinking, unmoving, uncaring. Mind and body exhausted. Having gone through the worst ordeal of her life. Her mind had almost snapped, almost gone insane under the pressure. She could feel it. But she was still here.

And now, she was different. Changed.

The weight of all the recent revelations about her life, along with the near total collapse upon being flooded with the heinous memories of Wolfe's cruel, sadistic existence were enough to wipe away any and all guileless assumptions about this life. About Corporate Society. About the Corporate Saviors. She was no longer in a state of innocence. Oh, she had known for a long time that Corporate Society was bullshit, that one just needed to jump through the right hoops and say the right things, yes. But she had thought, in her naive state, that it was enough to just dance the dance, to just go through the motions, and that would be enough. Everything would turn out alright. She had everything she needed. Life was beautiful.

Wolfe's memories had forever shattered that fragile crystal, that idealized view of the world.

First, the Corporate Saviors had banished her beloved mother to Hell. Just for obeying her natural impulses. The knowledge that her mother's soul, her consciousness was still alive racked her mind with torment. Her mother's every waking moment was one of never-ending torture. The fires of hell... straight from mythology and religion into reality, thanks to the wonders of modern technology.

And now this. She had been whisked away, disappeared to whatever place this was. But...she was a Reality Mediator. A celebrity! Surely, they would have mercy on her. She just had to talk to someone...anyone. Someone would help her for sure.

She had never found herself wanting for people who could help her get out of bad situations, pull some strings, help her get what she wanted.

And then it hit her. If they knew she had special mental powers, wouldn't they want to do tests on her brain? Maybe that's why they had brought her to this place. Maybe they had to move her somewhere out of the public view, so they could experiment and do as they please without people finding out. God damn her special powers. Now she wished she had never found out about them. If I can somehow get back to the Saviors' good graces, back to society, I promise I'll never use my powers again! Maybe they can even do surgery on me, make it so I can never use these powers again. Was it my fault I was born with special powers?

Shit. I need to call Mick, my producer. He'll get me out of this mess. She closed her eyes and focused-clicked the word "Call." Suddenly there was a pop-up screen with the words "OUT OF RANGE." Damn it! So I'm within range of that goddamn system they are trying to connect me to, but nothing else!

As she lay there thinking about what to do next, she noticed out of the corner of her eye that the door was open.

Sitting here sulking isn't helping anyone. I'll find someone, anyone that can help me. That Wagstaffe seems like a complete psycho, but surely there must be someone that can help. Her charisma had never failed her in the past. Of course, she had never been in a situation like this…

Suddenly, her mind caught hold of something indistinct. Distant. A memory. Of this place. But the memory wasn't hers…

More and more memories began to slowly seep in. She got up. She stumbled out the door and into the hall. There was no one around. She stared at the exit at the end of the hall. Could this be it? The distant, foggy memories flowed through her like dreams, like whisperings from another life…

She realized that there were hundreds of them…planning, designing, visiting a facility in the mountains. She had to see for herself…

She approached the exit at the end of the hall. It was unlocked.

She opened the door.

MEDIATOR'S MEMORIES: THE FIRST GHOST

My name is Kristal Silverberg. In my mind, I hold the memories of many people. Here is one of them...

The muscular tan man sat there, in his nanochair, his eyes staring blankly in front of him, not seeing the outer world. Wolfe. In the mental screen filling his mind, a man with a moustache interviewed a bald skinny man with glasses and an accent.

"Up till now in history," the skinny man was saying, "the humans were so complicated that from a practical perspective, it still made sense to believe in free will, because nobody could understand you better than you understand yourself. You had this inner realm of desires and thoughts and feelings which you had privileged access to...this inner realm..."

"Yeah, but that hasn't changed today, right? Like, that—" the interviewer said.

"It has changed. There is no longer...the privileged access now belongs to corporations. They can have access to things happening ultimately inside my body and brain, which I don't know about. There is somebody out there—and not just one. All kinds of corporations and governments that maybe not today, maybe in five years, ten years, twenty years, they will have privileged access to what's happening inside me. More privileged than my access. They could understand what is happening in my brain better than I understand it, which means—they will never be perfect..."

"Right. But you will, as a free person, like, you will have delegated that access or that ability to this corporation or this machine or this-"

"No, you don't have to give them permission. I mean, in some countries maybe you have no choice at all. But even in a democracy like the United States, a lot of the information that enables an external entity to hack you, nobody asks you whether you want to give it away or not. Now at present, most of the data that is being collected on humans is still from the skin outwards. We haven't seen nothing yet. We are still just at the tip of this revolution..."

Wolfe focus-clicked the icon of an arrow backing out of a

box at the top corner of the image in his mind, and suddenly the image reduced down to a single point of light, which presently disappeared. He once again had access to his physical eyeballs and was looking at the room in front of him.

"The tip of the revolution, indeed! Ah…Harari. You understood things perfectly, even if the man who created the MindLink doesn't. Room, summon up the ghost of Harari. I'd like to speak with him."

A smooth robotic voice replied, "Calling up Harari now."

Suddenly, a hologram of the skinny man with glasses from the interview appeared, standing in front of Wolfe.

The first ghost.

Flesh made word.

Flesh made code.

Yuval Harari.

The ghost spoke up. "Hello, friend. How is progress on MindLink coming?"

"Very well. Soon, MindLink will be installed in every human body. Soon, we will have that privileged access to peoples' minds that you prophesied. The only pain in my ass is that I just wish we could find someone brilliant enough to create the technology we need, but who also agrees with us on all points."

Harari lifted a hand to his incorporeal chin. "Yes, that's the dilemma, isn't it? You can always find docile people, but they won't be intelligent. And you can always find intelligent people, but they won't be docile."

"I know I've asked you this before, but…you've gotta tell me. From your perspective, are you really Yuval Harari, or are you just a program designed to say stuff that he would have said?"

"That question involves philosophical and metaphysical questions which ultimately are unanswerable, but I can tell you from a personal point of view, I feel remarkably like Yuval Harari. I even remember what happened before I was uploaded, just like it was yesterday."

"I knew you'd equivocate. That's so like you. Anyways, whatever. What you said about corporations having special access to individuals' minds was brilliant! I wish you could talk our lead researcher into thinking that way. I've got a dreamer on my hands that thinks we should be airy-fairy

philanthropists."

"He doesn't think corporations should own people's souls?"

"It doesn't matter what he thinks. I'm tired of his silly ideas for how we should use his invention. He gets paid to create the technical solutions to our problems, not to decide what we use them for. But no matter. He is simply a vessel for the transfiguration of the Corporations into their final degree of Godhood, whether he knows it or not. Are you sure you don't want to come down here in a body—the word made flesh?"

"No, I prefer living in the pureness of data, the cold numbers and logic, than the stinky human flesh. Unless it's Russel Brand's flesh. If he had been uploaded before that ghastly accident, then I'd probably take you up on your offer. I do so miss my Russ-Russ..."

"Right. Well, look at the time, I'm late to an appointment! Been nice chatting with you, Harari."

"You don't want to chat for a little while about how sexy Russ-Russ is? It is my number one passion besides—"

The hologram suddenly disappeared, leaving the tan man to brood alone. Yes, the final stage of the Corporations owning all individuals' minds. It was soon upon them. He could almost smell, almost taste the thoughts of all those billions of people.

He smiled.

"Humanity, soon your thoughts will no longer be yours. They'll be ours!"

CHAPTER 14: THE TOWERS

Kristal was a color virgin.

A reality virgin.

Corporate citizens were not aloud outside the vast Corporate Zones, where the cold, lifeless grey of the smog-choked sky and the cement buildings shielded their eyes from the hues of reality.

Therefore, as Kristal stepped outside, a physiological process happened in her eyes that had never happened before.

A scene played out more vivid and beautiful than anything her eyes had ever beheld in reality, while at the same time infinitely more real and tangible than anything she had witnessed in the sims.

Pink clouds drifted serenely in the lush blue sky above, drenching her retinas for the first time in real, not virtual, color. The golden sun was setting behind the evergreen treetops. A majestic blue mountain covered in white snow rose high above the rich green of the forest below.

The sims were merely electronic stimulation of the brain, not real light of different wavelengths entering the cornea. What was happening now, perceiving the color of the world around her, was an entirely new biological process.

Her virgin eyes…

Completely bathed in color for the first time…

Even when she had flown from Diego-Angeles…modern airliners had no windows for passengers, to protect them from the horrific things they would see in the Unsaved Zone, or so claimed the airline corporations.

Although this was the first time her eyes were beholding such a miraculous vista, her mind had seen this place before. Through someone else's eyes. The strange sensation made it feel like she was now seeing something she had dreamed of hundreds of times. But she knew that it was not a dream. It had been reality.

She stood there for what felt like ages, entranced, her eyes feasting on reality, basking in the beauty, transfixed by the first experience of real color. But then, as the sun dipped below the trees and the sky began to darken, she saw it. The ugliness. The artificiality. The mechanical creations of man's making to ruin the perfect, sublime beauty of nature.

The towers.

Sickening. Wretched, horrible things.

Dark. Ominous. Foreboding.

Projecting into the sky like clutching robotic hands, trying to squeeze all natural life from the world, their sharp, mechanical claws puncturing the beautiful sky. Near the top of each of the towers, a profusion of shimmering wires erupted and flowed into a seemingly haphazard conglomeration of eerie black boxes, a clump of the cables feeding into each box. The wires glistened with the current of data. Rainbows of pulsating information. Polychromatic, sparkling, digital utterances of cryptic precision dancing from them to hidden devices, shielded under titanaluminum housing, facing all four directions. Several rows of these uncanny arrays of gluttonous mechanical boxes each devouring a throbbing digital flow of information were stacked one on top of the other.

Datalight.

Sucking the information from the human organism and into the mainframe on a mass scale.

And at the top, above the highest cluster of boxes, sat several large poles, and on the end of each pole, a sharp, pointed blade sticking straight up like a bayonet, as if trying to stab the heavens.

What were those horrible towers? To what end had they been constructed? They looked as if they had been designed by an AI gone mad. No human being could imagine something as sinister and mechanical as these things, she opined.

And then there were the ugly watchtowers, jutting up above tall, razor-sharp barbwire, a blight upon the enchanting twilight sky. The chilly silhouettes of guards looking out, laser rifles cradled in their arms, the red dots of their sights straying fluidly over anything unfortunate enough to be in their way.

This place.

She had never been here, and yet she remembered it.

The place from the memories.

Suddenly her waking life, her own subjective experience of the world, and Wolfe's foggy memories began to merge, to crystallize. The dark, murky dreamworld of recollection was beginning to take shape, to condense into reality. Not only did she know this place, but she knew many, many things about it.

She had been gazing, for some time, up above, transfixed first by the immaculate sky, then by the horrendous mechanical towers, completely oblivious to everything down below, all around her. But she was abruptly jolted out of her trance by…the things swarming all around her. She wanted to run back inside, back to her cell, but she could do nothing. She just stood there, paralyzed.

These things…these…creatures…who…what…were they?

They lumbered about slowly, methodically…arranging themselves in strange, symmetrical patterns, as if they were cellular automata, simply cells following some mathematically plotted out course, forming geometrical mosaics. They clumped together here, and rearranged themselves there.

There were hundreds of them milling about the camp. And they all had the same gait, the same mannerisms. And all were engaged in the strange, seemingly pointless activity of forming the same bizarre sequences.

But above all, the most haunting thing was their faces.

The true face of a citizen.

The face that every government wants in their subjects. The look of complete and utter lack of resistance.

Observing these humans that didn't move like humans, but like machines, and who wore faces, not of humans, but faces lacking any will of their own, she at once was filled with shock and panic.

The glazed over looks. The blank stares. The robotic shuffling and rearranging to here or to there. She noticed that where there was an agglomeration of citizens forming a tessellation structure in one area, the cables on the towers closest to them glimmered more brightly, more furiously. The towers were dancing in sync with the information they were transmitting and receiving from the humans below. A few of the towers, which were in areas where there were no citizens, were blank, dark, empty.

She suddenly felt sick at the sight of the humans that were no longer human, but had transitioned all the way and had become pure citizen—all humanity, all personal autonomy gone. Pure vessels of the holy State, nothing more.

A human is a human insomuch as he seeks to walk his own path, free from control, free from compulsion. An individual,

making individual choices. Even Kristal, who obeyed her Saviors outwardly out of necessity, still retained that portion of herself that was herself, even if she had to hide it away from society in the privacy of her own thoughts.

A human remains human only when he is separate, unique. But bend a human, force him to become no longer what he wants to become, but what the government wants, what the corporations want, what society wants, and you no longer have a human. You have a unit. A component. A mere segment of society. A replaceable, interchangeable piece of the group. To the extent that one rebels, even if only in a private corner of one's mind, one remains human. But the goal of every government, she realized, is to obliterate every last vestige of humanity, to destroy the individual, to own not only his body but also his mind in its totality. And to what end? To make him nothing more than a homogenous part of the monolithic whole. To force the round peg into the square hole. If all citizens, are, as they want us to be, interchangeable and congruent, then what value does the human have? One is simply a discrete quantity of the unvarying whole. The more one becomes a citizen, the more one ceases to be a human, ceases to be an individual.

And once the process is complete, once one has purged oneself of all individuality and taken wholly upon oneself the identity of the State, one becomes such as these, those who composed this ghastly mosaic of former humanity.

Then she realized something. That voice…that strange woman in her head. It had been trying to connect her, trying to make her become like these citizens. But she was the only one here who wasn't affected by the towers. Why?

Of course! She was the only one with her unique mental abilities. Her mind had shucked off the towers' influence, had refused to become part of the system. Just as their equipment had always had problems working on her in the past, so too did these sinister towers fail to reach her mind. What was more, apparently General Wagstaffe and his guards had failed to realize that she wasn't under their spell, that she wasn't connected to the system. They overestimate their technology, she mused.

She at once felt sickened and horrified, and yet, strangely, drawn by morbid fascination to the nightmare before her eyes.

What did her powers mean? That she didn't want to totally become a slave, to become totally a part of the system?

And what was this scene showing her? That the Corporate Savior's system existed only to wipe out the human spirit, to turn man into machine? But how could one survive in society, when the Saviors controlled everything? The food we eat, the clothes we wear. What choice did one have, born into a society which one didn't create? I don't want to become like this. But I want to live! And I want to live the best life I can! And, as far as I can tell, that means advancing my career, moving up the ladder.

She thought of her mother. This same society which had been feeding Kristal, lavishing her with privilege, had been tormenting her poor mother's soul.

That's what I've been doing, mother. Trying to live the best that I can. Despite the awful things they're doing to you. Am I wrong? Don't you want me to be successful?

But, she hadn't known about these…these things. Not until now. The monstrosity before her eyes, along with the abominations from Wolfe's memories…these put everything in a new light. But…if not advance in society, focus on her career, what other choice did she have? Oh, mother…I wish you were still here, to tell me what to do…to tell me everything will somehow be alright.

As she began to walk through the patterns of humans, careful to avoid their slowly lumbering bodies, Kristal remembered something from Wolfe's memories. The guards had given a nickname to these humans completely controlled by the central AI. Meatbots. A shiver went down her spine at the thought of becoming like these unfortunate souls.

She decided it would be better to pretend to move in mathematical, predictable ways like the meatbots, and to have the glazed over look in her eyes, so as not to give any clue to the guards—or to the meatbots themselves—that she wasn't part of their little experiment.

What had Wolfe been thinking when he sent her here? Wouldn't he have suspected that it wouldn't work on her? Was he just toying with her? Perhaps he would show up here and conduct experiments on her brain. She now knew, from his memories which were coalescing in her brain, that he was a

man without sympathy and without remorse, capable of anything.

As she worked her way slowly through the camp, she happened to glimpse a large statue in front of one of the buildings. She shuffled over to it. It was a large, bronze rendition of a skinny, bald man with glasses. An inscription on the base of the statue read "Yuval Harari."

She knew about this man from Wolfe's memories. Wolfe was a big fan. He had read all his books and watched all his videos. This man had famously said that corporations will have more privileged access to peoples' souls, aka their minds, then the people themselves. Just like the god in the Abrahamic religions. Harari, Wolfe had said, was an Elijah in the wilderness, preparing the way for the new deity, the Corporations in their fully apotheosized form.

Harari annoyed her, like McScottish annoyed her. Suddenly she was back in her normal mood of being pissed off at people who played the victim. He had simultaneously played up his sexual preference, as if it had somehow made him a victim, while at the same time bragging about being in the ruling class of corporate elites. Well, which one is it? You can't be both a victim and in the ruling class. You and that idiot McScottish both seem to be confused about that. She, on the other hand, was Jewish, a woman, and now she was in a concentration camp! If you want to pretend to be a victim, wait until you yourself are in a concentration camp! She had way more reasons to play the victim than that elitist corporate mouthpiece ever had! But she preferred not to. She preferred to be a strong, independent woman. Not a victim.

She laughed inwardly. Here she was, literally in a concentration camp, making the decision not to be a victim. The diametric opposite of McScottish. If anyone had a reason to claim victim status, it was her. But she reminded herself of what she had always said—that as soon as someone claimed to be a victim, that person also gave up their right to be an autonomous, self-sufficient human being. They had already admitted that they were not an actor, but an object to be acted upon.

Then she noticed there was another inscription, below the corporate elitist's name. It read, "ALL SOULS ARE RULED BY FICTIONS. FIRST THERE WAS GOD, AND NOW

CORPORATIONS."

Kristal was intelligent, well-read, and couldn't stand people like this. Here he was, sending out two completely incongruent messages. I'm a victim, have sympathy for me. I'm part of the clergy, part of the priesthood that rules over you. Just as in ancient times the clerical class ruled over the peasants with their idea of "god," so today did a corporate priesthood rule over the modern peasants through their idea of "corporations." Kristal took one last disgusted look at the bronze figure of the man, and at the inscription beneath him. All souls ruled by fictions, huh? First god, and now corporations? Yes, she thought to herself. And thus spake the Nietzsche of the 22nd century: 'CORPORATIONS ARE DEAD.'

As she shuffled along with the meatbots, wandering about this strange camp, the light of the evening quickly fading, she realized something. If I want to be a national journalist...well, I now have the two biggest stories of the century—the first about what they are doing with the vats, which Wolfe had played a key role in, and the second is what's going on at this place here—and I'm stuck in it! I'm stuck in the biggest story of the century! She chuckled. Of course, the Corporate Saviors would never let her report on either of those things. She was just amusing herself.

Or...was she?

How amazing would it be to blow the lid on this whole thing, to expose the detestable Corporate Saviors and their malicious schemes? How tempting that would be, especially after what they had done to her mother...

But...shit! I need the Corporate Saviors. I need their autofacs to survive. It sucks, needing people that you detest.

She realized that society was a double-edged sword. It at once provided what the individual needed to survive, but in so doing, it also enslaved the individual, entwined its ever-pervasive tendrils around them.

And now she was balanced on the edge of that sword. How wonderful it would be to have the power to really report on what the Corporate Saviors are doing, to expose them. But at the same time how suicidal that would be.

But, she thought wryly...suicide. Unless I can find a way out of here, I don't have much to live for, do I? In fact, if they really

plan to do tests on me, or if that psycho Wagstaffe decides to conduct his "experiments" on me... Memories were flooding back to her of Wolfe helping Wagstaffe engage in all sorts of atrocities in Thailand. Wagstaffe had been the creative mastermind, inventing new ways to torture their playthings. She shuddered. Those memories were so horrific she was trying her hardest not to think about them. If she had to choose between being their plaything and dying, dying suddenly didn't seem like such a bad option...

That was when she remembered another strange memory of Wolfe's. A more recent one, of him and Wagstaffe hunting down people trying to escape the Corporate Zone. Why would anyone want to do that? How could anyone hope to survive outside the Corporate Zone? What she needed was not to escape the CZ, but to get out of this god forsaken place and back to normal everyday life. But who could she talk to? Who would help her? Definitely not Wagstaffe!

She closed her eyes and tried to call someone again. Maybe I have a signal now that I came outdoors. But she still got the same error message.

Shit! She was stuck out here, in this place, with not a soul in sight but the meatbots and the menacing guards with their weapons, and it probably wouldn't be a good idea to reveal herself to them, to let them know she wasn't hooked up to the system. She was up a creek, without a paddle.

Ironically, despite having so many other people's memories at her fingertips, she had no memory of how she had gotten here. From the flashes of broken memories from before she awoke in the grey padded cell, she knew that others, like her, had been taken, had been put in sacs full of some gel-like liquid, had been transported to this place. She had lost consciousness at Rosewood Mental Clinic and only regained it after being taken out of the sac. How long had it been? She remembered gasping for breath as they cut her free from the sac, in that room full of other sacs, cutting people free. The look on their faces as they woke up, terrified, cold, covered in ooze. Then they had updated her and the others' smartphones. The XI Smartphone system (comprising both intphn and xtphn) was completely liquidproof. Citizens could swim with them on, without fear of the electronics inside short-circuiting. Thus, they had left them on while in the fluid-

filled sacs. In fact, citizens almost never took them off, even to sleep. The Corporations had even created specially-designed memory foam pillows which made it comfortable to sleep, even with the xtphn on.

Staring at the imprisoned minds around her, she remembered a strange passage she had read by Sartre years ago, claiming that even a man in prison is free. Yes, that is true, she now realized. Up until the point that even one's own mind is controlled. Her mind, unlike the minds around her, was still free, still her own. Thus, Sartre's statement was correct, for her. Though she was fenced in, she had infinite options. Because she still retained control of her most important asset. Even more important than her physical body. That which made her her. Her mind. And anyone still in control of their own mind has infinite options. She could replay music in her head, replay memories from her life, fantasize about anything she wanted, she could create art—write a poem, a song, a novel. How many works of art had been created in prison, while the body was in shackles, but the mind was free?

But what Sartre hadn't foreseen was this scene in front of her.

The ultimate prison.

The prison of the mind.

In a totalitarian society, where all of society itself is a prison, the mind is the final frontier for the jailers to conquer. The holy grail. They don't want to own only your body, but also your soul. And that means your mind. But, as long as one could retain control over one's own mind, even if one needed to lie to stay alive, to cheat, to steal. Even if one had to pretend to conform, to obey one's masters. Even if one were the only person alive to whom one could confide one's inner rebellion. If one could only retain one's freedom over the inner domain of their own thoughts, the totalitarians had still lost.

But, once even one's own inner thoughts were conquered, subjugated, controlled, she knew that it was game over.

Victory for the totalitarians.

And that was what she was witnessing here.

She decided it would be better to die than to become like these mindless things walking all around her. Simply a tool, a plaything for someone else. She must not let that happen to

her. That's why she had to get out of this place, no matter the cost.

As blank stares stumbled past her geometrically, she wondered if she knew any of the poor souls who had ended up here, like herself. As she looked at each one of them for a few moments, studying their faces to see if she recognized them, she realized it was hard to tell them apart. They all wore the same face.

The face of the system.

Then she realized it. Then Wolfe's memories, now clear and distinct, hit her like a bulldozer.

Oh my god! Those hideous, awful, accursed towers…their plan is to set them up everywhere! To control everyone!

So this is their goal, she thought to herself. To put us all into a grid, tied into the network so they can control our minds 24/7, no longer individual humans, but rather just components on a network, just nodes. And whoever controls the technology, controlling these towers instead of being controlled by them, will have total control over society. Control the technology, and you control the people. Master devices and slave devices. They control the master devices and we are the slave devices.

And through Wolfe's memories, she now realized that she knew many, many things she hadn't known before. She had become knowledgeable on many subjects. For example, she knew the entire history of the internet, in detail. Wolfe had studied everything, knew about every step in the process since the very inception of the Net. And now, so did she. She knew about how ARPA (later DARPA) had created the ARPANET. She knew about project PRISM, and how from the very beginning the corporations had been involved in—nay, were the main perpetrators of—spying on all citizens through the Net, collecting, analyzing, storing their data, running them through virtual environments, predicting their future actions through AI-run simulations such as SWS (Sentient World Simulation). The corporations had been acting as one body, one government, together with the "government," all along, carefully constructing a system of world domination by controlling that innocent little word: "data."

She also knew about Jose Delgado's experiments in mind

control from the 1960's. She knew about MKUltra and MKNaomi.

And now, seeing these humans who were no longer human, but had been subjugated, controlled by data, she realized that she was looking at the pinnacle of their creations. What she was looking at brought all of those projects—plus many, many more—together, and subsumed them all.

So that was the final ending point of the Net from the beginning—all humans connected, controlled, subjugated via information technology. Our minds are made up of information. We make all our decisions based on information. Information rules our lives. And thus...

Control the information.

And you control the world.

It was that simple.

Kristal now knew everything. She could see the entire plan from the beginning, over a hundred years ago, all the way to its culmination, which the Corporate Saviors were planning to roll out soon.

Game over.

Every person in society would soon be enslaved. Enslaved by data.

And she had no way to save them.

DIARY OF THE UNSAVED: SCHOOL

The young man, now in remarkably better shape, muscles even beginning to fill out, had grown to relish this time of the day spent organizing his thoughts and expressing them as concrete words. Not because he thought anyone would ever read them, but because in so doing, he was exploring, learning about himself. Here among the Unsaved, he had ample time for both introspection, gaining valuable insights into the manifold secrets of that amazing faculty he was born with called the mind, and extrospection, spending time in that thing which doesn't exist in the Corporate Zone—nature—delving into all its variegated hidden treasures. He wrote:

There is no "academy" or, as the ancients called it, "school," among the Unsaved. Everyone, not only children, have the opportunity to study whatever and whenever they want and are encouraged to explore whatever subject they desire for however long they desire. This seems to have the opposite effect of forced learning. Forced learning causes a person to learn to hate learning—see it as something one "has" to do. Freedom to learn without compulsion, on the other hand, restores learning to its rightful throne as something fun and desirable.

I only realize now how stupid the Corporate Zone is, forcing children to sit all day and listen to an authority figure lecture, and how that creates stupid people who don't want to study and learn on their own, but who listen to and obey authority figures because of their conditioning. Maybe that was the goal all along?

One of the Unsaved, before he made it here, had made a copy of every book, every work of art, and every piece of music available in the Corporate Zone, and copied them all to a single datastick and smuggled them here. These are all made freely available in the Library, a hut equipped with several computers.

I was amazed at how intelligent and alive the Unsaved children are, compared to the obedient, unquestioning, unthinking zombies which the

Corporate Zone spits out from government vat to Govly Academy to Corporate Society.

Among the Saved, the Corporations and the Glorious Government's word is holy writ, and questioning so-called "authority" is called "Conspiracy Theory."

Among the Unsaved, there are no teachers, and children are not taught to obey authority, but rather that authority doesn't exist, and to question everything. There are people, of course, who are happy to answer their questions and give them their opinion, or teach them useful skills that they are interested in, but there are no grades, no report cards. And their opinion is just that—their opinion. No one is forced to or expected to have the same view on anything as anyone else. Quite the opposite of the Corporate Zone, where if someone doesn't have the same opinion as everyone else, people are conditioned to think they are "crazy" and ostracize them.

Grades, tests, quizzes—it's so obvious in retrospect that those are merely scare tactics to condition people to do what they are told, to have the opinions they are commanded to have, to not think for themselves, to not think outside the box. And most importantly, to not create. The Unsaved know from experience that people are their most valuable to society when they develop their own unique talents which they are passionate about and love doing, not when they live a miserable, unproductive life doing what they learned in "school"—obeying the hierarchy, checking off boxes, and regurgitating "facts." (Which prepares them to regurgitate the "party line," a.k.a. samethink, as adults. Ironically, these people think they don't live in a hierarchy and instead live in a democracy, when nothing could be further from reality.)

Oh, and another thing. Many of the people here actually read. I don't mean as in, they are literate. People in the Corporate Zone know how to read. The only problem is…they don't. They just sit around in the sims or watching cerebralvision all day. In the Corporate Zone, people associate books with learning, that horrible task they were forced to do at the Academy.

But here, people actually look at learning as something that is fun to do. They can't wait to spend some time alone, reading, learning. Novels, books on philosophy, books on science, books on psychology, sociology, mathematics, etc. The classics, such as Twain, Dickens, Dostoevsky et al.

The Unsaved not only visit the Library often to study on their own, but they do something else which I never saw the Saved do. They actually talk about the things they are studying. They meet together in twos, or threes, or groups of ten or twenty, and have long, intellectual discussions on philosophy, art, mathematics, literature, history, science. In the Corporate Zone, people rarely even have face-to-face conversations in real life. They either stay hooked into the sims all day, or do all their communicating through social media or instant messaging apps. When they do talk, it's always about vacuous subjects like what outfit a Corporate Savior's wife wore to an award ceremony that day on cerebralvision, or about some autobiography written by a Corporate Savior's son who is pretending to leave the Corporate Savior tradition and live a normal life to get more attention, or—their favorite—who can regurgitate the opinions and attitudes their Saviors commanded them to have most zealously.

The first time I ever had an intelligent conversation in my life was here, among the Unsaved. In the Corporate Zone, I never had an intelligent discussion once.

And now I have them every day.

CHAPTER 15: THE SINGULARITY

Blayze continued the long walk down the country road, in the middle of nowhere, surrounded by evergreens. It was windy and cold. Each step was laborious, fighting to move his massive body down the asphalt. His legs ached. His feet hurt. His head was pounding, still aching from however long he had been in that sac. He wanted to give up, but knew he couldn't stop. His large, amorphous body lurched forward slowly, tediously, his large reserves of adipose wobbling to and fro.

Suddenly, it began to rain.

Now, with the wind and cold rain beating into him, he wished more than ever to be back in his cozy apt, warm and dry, drinking some hot cocoa.

What happened? The last thing I remember is Dr. Richards saying they needed to do one more thing and putting me under the cerebral bubble again. What the hell did they do to me, to end up here?

He had been cursed to this…this place. Where was he?

He remembered how in that sac it had felt like he was an amoeba, a single-celled organism, and thought about how ironic it was that after millions of years of evolution, the shape of human beings had returned to their original roots. Modern, corporate-saved man was like an amoeba, a piece of clay which hasn't been molded. Lacking definition and shape. Like a single-celled organism. If Blayze had been hard, shaped, sculpted, this hike along this road wouldn't be so difficult and painful right now. But modern man wasn't made to walk, to do things.

I wish someone would come and get me! His clothes were now soaked in the rain. As he walked along the side of the road, he couldn't get over how incredibly dark it was in this place. He had never seen such a dark place before. And not a single person or hovercar in sight. No one to rescue him.

Wait, he realized. Why don't I just try to call someone on my xtphn? Duh! He laughed at his stupidity. He stopped walking. Closing his eyes, he selected the option to make a call from his Eyelid Menu. But immediately a red "OUT OF RANGE" message filled the backs of his eyelids. Shit! No connection to the Net! That could only mean one thing… He must be in the Unsaved Zone!

The Govly Makers had taught them that one of the reasons

no human being could survive in the Unsaved Zone was that there was no access to the Net.

Now he was unconnected, primitive. His body had been cut off from his source of life. The networks of his Corporate Saviors.

He began walking again. God damn it. They dumped me out in the Unsaved Zone, leaving me here to die. Modern man just wasn't made for this, he brooded. Modern man was made to sit around all day like a blob, ignoring his body, using his mind, not for useful things, but for never-ending, meaningless stimulation.

But didn't evolution mean survival of the fittest? Then how did we get to this point? And how much longer could humans survive, in their present condition? Would he, and all the other weak, shapeless, formless modern men be swept aside? Would evolutionary pressures re-emerge to make men strong? Or would humans continue to digress until they either destroyed themselves, or were destroyed by some stronger being?

A full moon had risen above the treetops, and now Blayze could see rather clearly ahead. In the distance, there was a large, majestic mountain. He racked his still dull and achy brain to remember from the sims which mountain that could be. He had never been outside the Corporate Zone in real life before, but he had visited quite a number of places virtually in SimWorld. Was it Fuji? It looked so resplendent and beautiful in the silvery moonlight. No, wait! He knew that mountain. Mount Rainier!

Of course. It made sense. Though he had never left the Corporate Zone, all the vatchildren in Govly Academy learned that Mount Rainier lay relatively close to Seatt-Tacoma, in the dreaded Unsaved Zone, a treacherous place where humans would starve or be eaten by wild animals. That's why people couldn't go there in real life to visit it. Plus, as their Govly-Makers had taught them, "why spend time in reality, when you can spend time in ***virtual*** reality?"

Shit! This is bad. I'm going to die! He thought. I need to get back to my comfortable apt and free corporate food! Won't someone come save me, please? It's impossible to survive without Corporate Saviors and their autofacs!

Damn it! I should have never read those books. The mentist sure didn't like all those questions I had. That's what got me in trouble! Like they teach us in Govly Academy, critical thinking is dangerous. Let the Reality Mediators tell you what reality is. Don't go trying to study things on your own. When I get back, I'm gonna only play the sims like everyone else! I'm not gonna try to be smart. Being smart only ended me up out here. The way to fit into society, he realized, was to be dumb.

But now, as he struggled to move his mass forward, painstaking step after painstaking step, he became acutely, painfully aware of an inconvenient truth. If I were a primitive man…if I didn't have technology, if I actually spent time in nature, if I ate natural food, not from a factory, then…why then…this would be no problem for me!

But that was just crazy talk.

Saying that humans were superior hundreds of years ago, that technology had had adverse effects on humans…that was heresy.

In his online research, Blayze had run across facts that ran counter to the mandatory body positivity courses. Conspiracy Theories. Contrary to the claims of their Glorious Government, corporate food in America had gotten steadily more and more fattening and carcinogenic over the last two centuries, ever since industrialized food had gone mainstream. Americans over that time period were actually getting steadily less and less healthy—the exact opposite of government claims. And it wasn't just from over-eating and not exercising, although that was a big part of it. There was also something about the way food was processed in America. America was always the #1 country leading the world in obesity, with the other countries taking several years or decades to catch up. Speculating that U.S. manufacturers were putting something in the food supply that made people gain weight faster was pure Conspiracy Theory, for that would imply a conspiracy on the part of those controlling the food manufacturing plants. But it also seemed to be backed up by evidence. Any Conspiracy Theory was anathema to the Glorious Government. But a Conspiracy Theory backed up by evidence, that was an abomination of abominations. For citizens to question the motives or actions of their Glorious Government or their Corporate Saviors was unconscionable.

All of that aside…did no one notice the explosion of the human body? To be a conspiracy theorist just means to ask questions. (Which is also supposed to be the job of a scientist. Except, scientists only ask questions that they can get funding to ask. All of science is ruled by fiction. The fiction of money.) Questions like…why has the average weight of the entire human race just doubled in the last two decades? It was like Moore's law, only applied to the average weight of a person's body. Every twenty years it doubles.

And if human weight grows steadily every decade, and if obesity had already reached its saturation point, where would it go from here? Would there be a singularity of adipose? A single moment in history when man becomes so fat he can no longer stand, no longer move around? Will we just become stationary blobs, sitting all day in our pods, using remote controlled robots to do anything physical we need to do?

The horrible thing about questions was that they led to answers. Everyone was eating food made by the corporations…so…it must have something to do with that food! But questioning your masters, the owners of the corporations, was insanity. Thus, to use the scientific method, one needed to be insane. And one needed to not be a scientist. Since scientists were dependent on their Corporate Saviors for funding. And their Corporate Saviors didn't allow them to ask the "wrong" questions. Science was restricted to a tiny box called "rightthink," determined, not by reality or evidence, but by the Corporate Saviors.

America had always led the world in marching steadfastly towards the Adipose Singularity. In 1960, only about 10% of adults in the country had been obese. But by the year 2000, that number had more than doubled to about 27%. By 2030, it had almost doubled again to about 50%. By 2050, it had soared to about 74%, and then, by 2070…100%.

100% of humans obese. None of them with a healthy weight, according to their predecessors a century before. And all this had happened within the span of about ten decades. One lifetime.

So the human body, which had basically been the same for millennia, suddenly radically transformed within the space of about one hundred years, weighing two or three times as much as it had for thousands of years. The century of the

Obesity Explosion, or OEE: the Obesity Explosion Event. That's what radical Conspiracy Theorists on the Net who don't fact check their findings called it. A catastrophic, species-wide event, impacting the health of humans worldwide. A major turning point in the history of the species. Probably if the facts had been checked, it would show that our eyes deceive us, and humans are the same as they had been for thousands of years, not several times larger.

Of course, the government and the corporations couldn't admit that 100% of the populace had a serious medical condition, brought on by the modern lifestyle. That would reveal that industrialization and technology had proven, at least in one important area, to be a curse instead of a blessing. Their Corporate Saviors weren't saving them! They were doing the opposite! So they did the only reasonable thing. They removed the word "obesity" from the dictionary. And suppressed all medical evidence of its negative health effects. And created government body positivity courses. Of course we live in the healthiest time in history! Of course our bounteous Corporate Saviors have made our lives better in every way, not worse!

Corporate Science declared mankind's new body to be a good thing. The Glorious Government had applauded reaching 100% obese—or as it was now called, 100% healthy, or corporate-saved—as one of its crowning achievements and indoctrinated the masses to thank their Corporate Saviors for saving them from the wretched, malnourished state of the primitives, and bestowing upon them a new body, a better body—the modern body. Corpus Corporatus. Not only healthier, but also Net-ready. Every human body connected 24/7 to the Net.

But anybody who had studied the historical records knew that this was a lie. Modern man was not healthier than the primitives. And even now, trudging down the road with all his might—requiring every ounce of willpower to not stop and lay down from the shock to his system he was experiencing—it was impossible for Blayze to deny the truth. He had seen videos of primitives running, sprinting, jumping, doing acrobatics, martial arts. Their physical feats far exceeded those of Corporate Man.

Or maybe the obesity explosion and the rapid

transformation of the modern body was all simply a coincidence, not tied to anything the corporations had done. Perhaps all the individuals had done it separately, at the same time, to themselves. And corporations and their food had nothing to do with it. Or perhaps the corporations had done it on accident. Maybe the manufacturers had been trying their best to make healthy food the whole time. Perhaps it had been a mistake. An oversight. Perhaps they simply had not noticed the explosion of weight all around them, even when records suggested that it had happened over a relatively short time span, for example going from almost no children or teens being overweight or obese to an alarming number of obese children occurring in a matter of one or two decades. Or people moving from other countries to America and suddenly putting on weight. What had changed? Certainly not their diet.

Oh, fuck it all! None of these statistics flashing through his brain could help him now. Knowledge was a curse. He just wanted to be in his warm, comfortable bed in his apt. Erase my memory! Destroy all the knowledge I've hoarded like a packrat. What good is it to me out here? Just let me back into the Corporate Zone, and don't leave me to die in the wilderness!

Being dumped in the fucking middle of nowhere was a hell of a way to realize that in order to be accepted in Corporate Society, one needed to be fat, stupid and lazy. Okay, you win! That's what you want, that's what you're gonna get! Get ready, Corporate Saviors, to see the fattest, stupidest, laziest citizen you've ever seen!

But Blayze was also alarmed at what a prodigious number of primitive facts he had remembered. In fact, he knew that he had studied far, far more than this. Those few thoughts barely scratched the surface. All things primitive, and studying and trying to understand reality to the fullest degree possible had been his passion and raison d'être. And look at where it had gotten him! But he also remembered now that after having most of his memories wiped every ninety days for his own good, he always had begun almost immediately to remember some things he had studied here and there. Some memories trickled back. That meant their technology—advanced as it was, to the point of being able to wipe out citizens' memories—was not all-powerful. It had limitations. Apparently the mind

was much more powerful than anyone had given it credit for.

And now he began to remember that this was how he had spent his last eight years since Govly Academy, studying, searching, seeking, trying to understand the world around him, only to have many of his findings wiped out every few months. But each time, a little bit always found its way back, and thus, slowly and surely, he was discovering reality. Understanding reality was something that couldn't be done overnight. It was a grand task, something that required dedicated effort over a lifetime. But Blayze remembered that he had been committed. And he had been doing it, succeeding against all odds, even against the mentists. While the Corporate Saviors and everyone around him wanted him to remain ignorant and spend his days in the sims, what Blayze had wanted more than anything was to uncover the secrets of the universe. That must have been why they exiled him from Corporate Society and left him here to die. He was sure. He would repent, beg forgiveness, and survive by being a lazy idiot like the rest. He was committed.

In the rain he could see the spotlight ahead growing ever brighter and bigger. Actually, now he could see there were several spotlights. And also watchtowers, and a high, menacing fence with barbed wire on the top. What was this place? A prison? But there are probably people here. And without other people, how can I hope to survive out here in the Unsaved Zone on my own?

But as he walked closer and closer, the place began to seem more and more threatening. Would the people here help him? It looked like some sort of military installation, perhaps. Now he could see the guards atop the towers in greater detail. Some were holding what looked to be long laser rifles. Others were looking through binoculars. They must be looking out for anyone not authorized to be here. Maybe they would imprison him, or torture him, for not loving his Glorious Government enough, for studying books and trying to understand reality.

But what options did he have, so far from the Corporate Zone? He couldn't imagine a world without corporations and governments, without McCharming Corporation's ass-wiping paper and FattyChemCo's manufactured food, the staples of modern man. How would he survive? I've got to convince the Corporate Saviors that I love them and I've had a change of

heart. Just let me come back to the Corporate Zone!

Think, Blayze! What should I do? I could go and tell those guards that I love the government and I'm out here by mistake. Yes, that's my way out.

But then he remembered that that hadn't worked with Dr. Richards. He had told Dr. Richards he loved the government. But somehow he had still ended up out here. Shit! So that wasn't going to work with these guards, either, he reasoned. And what if they shot him before he could even get within speaking range?

Looking at the tall fence and menacing guards, he mulled it over in his mind. I can't take this! I need humanity! He almost started walking towards them and waving his arms, but then caught himself. Wait, he thought. Let's think about this first before I get my ass shot. I know I can't survive in the wilderness by myself, but that doesn't mean I need to announce my presence to these guards immediately. It would be wiser to take my time and try to suss out the situation, do some reconnaissance, try to figure out what the hell this place is first before I do something rash.

He was now close enough that he could see what appeared to be an entrance. It was a rolling gate for vehicles. It was shut, and there was a booth with a guard inside. On the other side of the fence, he could see a few other guards standing around near the entrance. They all wore black uniforms. The spotlights were rotating, moving in wide arcs, as if looking for intruders. There was a clearing between the evergreens and the camp's tall fence. He was far enough away, and in the shadow of the trees, that they didn't appear to notice him yet.

And he noticed something else now, deeper into the camp, beyond the watchtowers. Something eerie and malevolent. Dark, cryptic towers piercing the starry sky. Huge conglomerations of cables, coursing with massive quantities of datalight, pulsating with an otherworldly rainbow glow. What the hell were those things? Some kind of new surveillance tower? But they looked taller and more menacing than any surveillance tower he had seen in the Corporate Zone. The hair on his neck raised just looking at them. Repulsed, he turned away, trying to take his mind off the strange looking scene.

Suddenly a thought raced through his head. I'm standing on a road. Hovercars usually travel on roads—at least, in the

Corporate Zone they do. There was at least one truck out here, the one I was in. Sooner or later, someone else has to come out here, and then I can ask them to rescue me!

So he decided to stand there, on the side of the road, just out of view of the guards. Someone is coming to rescue me, he thought. Someone will be here soon. Someone is coming to rescue me, just stay calm…someone is coming…

He stood there for what seemed like hours, days, his cold, wet body shivering, information about reality flashing through his frightened brain, thinking about how to convince people he loved the government.

But still no hovercars, no sign of human life, except the military place, or whatever it was. And now the rain had subsided, and the sky had started getting brighter. Grey at first, like in the Corporate Zone. But then, it started turning… huh?

Wow! This is amazing!

He had never seen anything like it. So it was true, the rumors he had heard! The sky really was blue outside the Corporate Zone! He stood there, awestruck, basking in the color saturating his retinas. The deep green of the evergreens' needles and the glowing, vibrant blue of the sky above them. Not the grey, lifeless sky of the Corporate Zone. He couldn't believe it…

His world now had color.

And the real world, not the virtual one! This was unlike anything he had ever experienced.

Maybe this was a good sign. Plus, it was morning now. Someone would come. Someone would save him!

After another few hours of waiting, he saw something else he had never seen in Seatt-Tacoma. The sun. A dazzling, glowing, golden ball of blinding fire in the sky. It had never been visible through the smog.

But still no hovercars.

His stomach growled.

Shit! Despite the grandeur and beauty of this spectacle, this thing called a sky…a really vivid, intense blue sky with a fiery orb, he realized that his belly was aching from lack of food, and his tongue and throat felt dry. He was going to die in this beautiful place.

Wait, if these woods are anything like the Magical Forest, maybe there are some mushrooms around here somewhere! And maybe even a stream!

Blayze walked to the edge of the forest. He took a cautious breath. He stepped in. As he walked along, the sound of leaves and twigs crunching underfoot, he eyed the quiet yet menacing trees. He knew from Govly Academy that the Unsaved Zone was a perilous place. I don't want to go too deep into this forest, he thought. If I do, I could get lost. Better to stay near the road and this military camp.

He stayed near the edge of the forest and kept the military camp in sight so he wouldn't get lost. He had been walking for a while, and now he was getting past the military camp. And no mushrooms or streams so far. Damn it! Wait…what's that up ahead? He kept walking, trying to get nearer and see… Yes, it was…a stream! Thank god! Blayze practically ran the rest of the distance to the stream. He threw himself down on his hands and knees and started imbibing the water. As he took in gulp after gulp, he realized that he had felt like he was dying of thirst. Probably just the shock of not being in the Corporate Zone.

Finally, satiated, he rolled over and just lay there on the ground near the stream. He almost fell asleep, but then was woken by some sounds in the trees nearby. It sounded like rustling, like movement. Shit! He had totally forgotten about the wild animals his Govly Makers warned him about! Now they were here to eat him!

Fuck, fuck, fuck, fuck…. He immediately stood up and started heading back towards the road. He had seen documentaries about the wild, about people being eaten by bears, tigers, pythons, and crocodiles. I need to get the fuck out of this forest, and I need to get out now! He moved his corpulent body as fast as he possibly could. He had never moved so quickly in his life. Finally, he made it back to the road. Whew!

He just stood there, with his hands on his knees, catching his breath. Then, after a while, he looked towards the fence and realized something.

There was someone on the other side of the fence who appeared to be watching him. And it didn't look like a guard. The guards all had black uniforms. This person was wearing

grey clothing. Hmmm…not a guard. No weapon. Yes, he thought. I'll wait until nightfall, and if a hovercar hasn't come by until then, I'll try to talk to this person. But what if they go to sleep? It doesn't matter. It's too risky to try to make contact during the day, without the cover of night. The guards will spot me immediately. And who knows if they're trigger-happy?

Just then, he noticed something in front of him. There were several mushrooms growing next to the road. He sat down, and started eating them.

Wolfe stood in the dining hall surrounded by his nirl feeders, sampling various delicacies while his body convulsed in full-body muscle spasms as he rammed his massive cock into the raw pussy bent over the table in front of him.

It was a new pussy.

A virgin one.

The hall was dominated by the fifty foot table and high-backed mahogany chairs, the sparkling diamond chandelier suspended above. Draped all along the table, lesbian love rituals were the main course, the symphony of moans reverberating off the acoustically perfect walls, soothing Wolfe's ears. At one end of the hall there stood a full set of authentic sixteenth century samurai armor purported to belong to the legendary Miyamoto Musashi, and on the other a bronze statue of Rick E. Hunts, the inventor of the Flowbee. Along the walls were placed life-size portraits of Wolfe posing in only a speedo, flexing his muscles and running his fingers through his lush, blonde hair.

What was making Wolfe's body jerk and spasm all over was a highly secretive experimental system being developed by his buddy, Corporate Savior Maxton Smith, CSO of Max Carnage Weapons, Inc., for the military, which consisted of infinitesimal nanodes implanted throughout his body which sent tiny electronic shocks to his muscle fibers, causing them to twitch in such a way as to stimulate muscle growth and obviate conventional weight-lifting sessions. The system worked wonders. He hadn't been to the gym for a few months, allowing him to instead spend that time in the dojo, and his muscles had only been getting bigger and harder during that time. A nirl nearby waved a wand over his body with all the latest advancements in exfoliating tech—the wand removed dead skin cells and cleaned his pores contactlessly. Another nirl sucked his platinum hair up into a Flowbee.

One of the feeders held a fork with a piece of real meat on the end of it, grown on a secret ranch in the Unsaved Zone for the Saviors. She deftly maneuvered the steak into his shaky mouth. Mmmm…bloody, juicy, and delicious. The real deal. Real dead cow. Not that lab-grown crap we force the lardasses to eat. Eating real meat had been outlawed decades ago.

Fuck it all! Wolfe thought to himself. He had been having

more of those accursed dreams.

Those despicable, horrid, detestable recurring dreams.

About that filthy bitch.

His mother.

His mother and the disgusting, nauseating men she had always brought home with her. Growing up with that disgusting whore had led to his defining moment, there in the kitchen, with blood dripping from the knife. The moment he had stopped being a whiny child, and became a man, taking matters into his own hands. The decisive moment of his life. That moment had led him here, to his position as Corporate Savior. But it still revolted him to think of that wretched whore who had welcomed him to the world through that foul, degraded vagina.

He was the only Corporate Savior who had not been born into money. Before the years in juvenile detention center, he had grown up outside the Corporate Zone with his mother and sister. Finally, having realized that Wolfe was incapable of staying out of the detention center, they had offered him to join the army, so that he could put his violent tendencies to use for the Glorious Government.

While in juvie, he had heard news that his mother had died of a drug overdose, and his sister had been put into a foster home. Long before he had gone to juvie, he had vowed to protect his sister. When he got back from serving his Glorious Government, he tried to find her, unsuccessfully. It was quite possible she had been killed during the great Corporate Gathering, when the areas outside the Corporate Zone had been declared “Unsaved Zones,” and the glorious salvation of the Corporate Saviors forced upon the people, who were relocated into colossal apartment blocks built for that purpose in the Corporate Zone. There had been many pockets of resistance, people not wanting to give up their homes or land, preferring to fight for their homes and die than to be saved by the Corporations. Many people had perished in the blood and carnage of those days.

Wolfe, with his chiseled features and youthful glow, had been a pretty boy in the military. A general had had an affair with him, later introducing him to men inside the corporations, landing him his first job which enabled him to work his way up

the corporate ladder, having love affairs with men in key positions which allowed him to get to where he was today. Since becoming a Corporate Savior, he vowed never to have sex with a man again. He had never liked it, only tolerated it, in order to serve his lust for power. But once he had power, he had fucked as many vaginas as possible, as often as possible, to make up for those years, servicing his butthole out to horny military and corporate men.

As the bizarre sensation of every muscle fiber in his body twitching at once coursed through him, he unsteadily reached out and grabbed one of the long, shiny black twintails of the nirl bent over the large dining room table in front of him and pulled back on it, jerking her head up towards him while forcibly ramming his junk in between her legs, slamming her roughly into the table. He continued to violently hammer the lightweight nirl into the table over and over. She was an Asian with genetically engineered eyes, one of them blue and the other red.

With his other jerky, spasmodic hand, he accepted a glass of red wine from one feeder while another carefully spoon-fed some caviar into his shaky mouth. He took a sip of the wine, and then shakily handed it back. Another nirl placed a Black Dragon cigar in his mouth and he took a jittery drag on it. She took it back and he exhaled a plume of smoke.

As he watched his cock plunge into and out of the tight virgin pussy and he came nearer and nearer to his twentieth orgasm of the day, he cogitated. This life is so boring! God! I wish I had been born in the time of Ancient Rome. I would have been a Julius Caesar, a Nero! But no, I was born in the Corporate Era when technology makes it so god damn easy to rule over the peasants! There's no challenge anymore! Even a retard could keep the masses under his thumb, control their every doing. And thus, I have to continuously overstimulate myself just to even keep my heart's grumbling at bay. I was born to be a conquerer! Not a bureaucrat.

Looking at the diminutive Oriental semen receptacle being banged violently into the mahogany table with every thrust of his hips, Wolfe's thoughts wandered back several decades to when he had been a commando in Southeast Asia. He had joined the military at seventeen, then spent six years in the jungles of Thailand, until they finally pulled out of that failed

endeavor, echoing a similar war in the previous century. But before being called home he had killed close to four hundred people, men, women, and children. He had been one of the best. And it had been the most thrilling part of his life. He wished the other Corporate Saviors had the balls to declare another war. They were so happy ruling over their captive lardasses that they had no motivation to do more than the minimum required of them. Such weaklings!

He looked at the Asian body in front of him. More refined, but slender and reminiscent of the emaciated village women he had raped.

The svelte Asian ass and virgin snatch being stretched out on his cock brought him back, back to the place he longed to be…

He was back in Surakhi.

Surakhi, one of the many Thai villages which his platoon had wiped off the map. It had been standard procedure. First, they lit the huts on fire. Then, they raped all the women, their screams intermingling with the smoke to fill the muggy night air. Then, they lined up the villagers, which were mostly women and children—their men had been out fighting on the front lines—and shot them for fun, often several non-lethal shots first to listen to their howling until they finally put them out of their misery. While the dumb idiots back home thought he was a hero, listening to the indoctrination on cerebralvision every day, believing he was fighting to protect the holy transexual ladyboys of Thailand from the evil, hetero, Right-Wing, White Supremacist Russians, this is what he and his fellow soldiers were really doing. Because this is war. This was what every war had ever been since the beginning of time. There never was any good side. Both sides were evil.

He was now fully transported to the past, raping and killing for the Glorious Government. The ass in front of him, just another victim of the Glorious Government and his stiff cock. Do you feel my cock inside you, bitch? That feeling inside you is the long arm of the government. Here, where no one can see what their taxes are doing. All those “loving liberal pacifists” back home, swallowing the propaganda, supporting the righteous war, giving their money to the military industrial complex, giving me endless pussies to fuck, endless corpses to pile up. A bunch of masochists anyways, who probably wished

they could be raped by the government themselves.

He leaned down, yanked the Asian nirl's head closer, and whispered into her ear, loud enough for only her to hear, "Soon I'll kill your friends, your family, everyone in this village. But right now, you'll feel my cock inside you and fear."

Hearing the real psychopathy in his voice for the first time, she screamed.

And her scream triggered something.

He blew his load.

Gripping the slim waist, he held her Asian body in place, forcing her womb to drink his cum.

As the euphoria slowly dripped away, he cerebrated. The only way for him to get off. Reliving the past. Back when there was a challenge. Ah…the jungles of Asia, the best years of his life.

Of course, there were milsims, secret sims developed for the military. Sims of killing and carnage. But it wasn't the same. What he truly needed now was a real enemy that was really trying to outwit him. Not a sim. He needed a god-damn challenge! He hadn't had one in decades!

The next iteration of Thought Management Technology would wipe away any and all resistance. And then he would move on to the next step in his plan. Subjugating all other Corporate Saviors to him. I'm getting old, he thought. I'm becoming more a politician and less a warrior every day. I just want one last fight, one last battle, before I become a stodgy old ruler, focused on political intrigue. I want to kill, maim, strike out at my enemies just one last time!

Suddenly, the room spoke to him. "Savior Wolfe, holo-call from Savior Pits. Shall I patch him through?"

He pulled out his cock and watched the semen drip from the Asian pussy, thinking about Surakhi.

"What does he want?"

"The Saviors are convening an urgent meeting to decide if the Third Generation of Thought Management Tech is ready to be launched in the Corporate Zone. He wants to speak to you directly and confirm that you'll be there."

The delights of war had prepared him perfectly for the life of a Corporate Savior. Being poor was for stupid, moral people. Only immoral people had what it took to be rich and powerful,

like Wolfe. Indoctrinating everyone that you were their Savior wasn't something a moral person would ever do. Yet it was something that the controlling class had always done, since time immemorial. Old-fashioned mind control. Convincing your enemy that you are their savior. That should have been the last chapter in Sun Tzu's Art of War.

A meeting, eh? Seatt-Tacoma was slated to be the first Corporate Zone to roll out the new system, and Wolfe was instrumental in its launch.

He let go of the twitching mass of Asian flesh in front of him. Then he grabbed the twintails and roughly pulled her up to her feet. Her body lacking any strength, it collapsed. She's done for today, he thought. He spoke to the nirl waving the wand over his skin. "Bring me my toga." She obeyed. As the nirl draped his toga around him, he said to the room, "Turn off the nanodes." That was sufficient for today. "And patch Pits through."

The young man's body was now sculpted. Ripped, even. His eyes shone with knowledge as he wrote:

I've noticed that while in the Corporate Zone people usually have almost no skills at all, and know only how to sit on their ass and explore the sims, or how to do some useless makework job created for them by their Saviors, filling out virtual forms or shuffling around digital papers (while providing no actual value to society) or the most important skill of all—obeying everything the government tells them to do like a good little slave and getting their free corporate food—the Unsaved on the other hand seem to all be bristling with dozens of actually useful, practical skills each. Everyone—men, women, and children—know how to hunt, fish, grow food, make clothing, swim, canoe, make their own ropes from natural things lying around in the forest, tie those ropes with dozens of different knots depending on the situation, create shelters, build rafts and canoes, and usually about a dozen other hobbies such as painting, sculpture, wood-carving, canoe-building, poetry, acting, knife throwing, acrobatics, hang-gliding, etc.

Why don't they teach any of these useful skills at Govly Academy? Come to think of it, after seeing how skilled and prepared for real life these people are, I realized something. Nothing they teach you in Govly Academy prepares you for reality. What is the purpose of even going to Govly Academy? While the vatlings in Govly Academy are learning which pronouns to use, children out here are learning how to actually survive in reality. How to survive, in the wilderness, by yourself. Which skill is more useful? Learning to keep yourself alive, or creating a new identity for yourself? And why are you letting authority figures and governments—in other words, the patriarchy—teach you about how to create your own identity? If you want to create your own identity, wouldn't it be better to do it on your own? Isn't that the point of having an individual

identity…to be unique and not obey some authority figure? So is this about creating new unique identities, or about mass conformity and submission to authority?

Which brings us to our point. Govly Academy doesn't teach anyone how to actually survive in the real world. It only teaches young impressionable minds how to fall into place on the hierarchy and receive what they need to survive from those who monopolize the means of life. Govly Academy doesn't exist to serve the interests of the people. It exists to enslave them. It exists to serve the needs of those who monopolize the means of life, to keep people dependent on them.

If Govly Academy actually taught people how to survive, they would no longer be dependent.

And therefore, they would no longer be slaves.

CHAPTER 16: THE GATHERER

Blackness.

Nothingness.

The void.

And then…

A staccato electronic whooshing sound.

Where am I?

Is this Hell?

Silence.

And then a thud.

I must be imagining things. So this is what Hell is like. Sensory deprivation. Losing all certainty about reality, about existence, losing one's grip on one's mind. Certainly this is only the beginning. Soon the tortures will commence.

He braced himself mentally.

Suddenly he felt something. He reacted violently to the feeling, channeling all his energies at it, trying to combat it. If they are going to torture me, I'm going to fight back! I'm going to steel my mind, I'm going to withstand it.

But then suddenly there was a voice saying things that didn't make any sense. "Shh! Calm down! I'm here to rescue you. Both our lives are in grave danger. You need to listen, and do exactly as I say."

And then he realized that the feeling he was tensing for, trying to combat was…

A hand on his shoulder?

Wait…he wasn't in Hell?

Suddenly a beam of directional light flashed out through the darkness. A face appeared, lit from beneath. His uncle. Holding a flashlight in one hand, and a huge, futuristic gun in the other. He pressed something on the gun, and suddenly there was the sound of many vents letting out air, and it collapsed down into a compact black bar, bearing no resemblance to a gun at all. Thomas put it inside a dark grey backpack. Drake noticed there was another similar backpack on the floor.

Drake looked down. He was still sitting in the Pearly Gate Seat. And…there was a body on the ground a few feet away, covered in loose, white robes. The Peter. Oh. The thud. It had been…

His uncle began removing the electrodes from Drake's head

as he spoke. “I wrote a virus which reprogrammed the main computer. As soon as I pressed the button on the Key of Fate, instead of uploading you, it sent a command to the Pearly Gate Seat to unlock your shackles. Then it turned on every system in the entire building at once and flooded them with commands, causing a power failure. You’re free. Get up. We need to get going.”

Dazed, Drake tried moving his arms and legs and realized his uncle was right. He was free. He had been prepared for any mental attack. But he hadn’t been expecting to use his body again. He rose weakly to his feet. “What about him?” Drake nodded towards the crumpled body on the ground.

“That sound you heard was my Soul Wiper. I’ve just permanently erased this man’s soul. He won’t be going to either Heaven or Hell.”

Soul Wiper? Drake had never heard that term before. Oh. That huge gun in Thomas’s hand. The man’s brainwaves. His data. Gone. Drake studied the emotionless face of the man on the ground, staring into oblivion. Apparently that beast of a gun wipes out all information and turns your brain into three pounds of useless grey matter.

“Now, quick. See over there? They brought your Reality Cube here to decommission it. They were going to sift through all its data after they uploaded you before repersonalizing its software to work with a new fixer. Grab it now and put it in this bag.” Thomas picked up the second backpack and handed it to Drake. Drake walked over and grabbed his Reality Cube, and put it inside the backpack.

When he walked back, Thomas had pulled out two strange devices shaped like horse shoes—a little bigger than xtphns—black, bulky and metallic. Thomas handed one to Drake.

“Here, you’ll need to attach this to your cervical inputs,” his uncle said.

“What is this?”

“It’s a S.H.I.Z.” Thomas had already attached his to his xtphn. With two connectors which plugged into the inputs on either side of the xtphn, it looked like it had been designed to latch onto the outer edge of the xtphn, making it thicker and chunkier.

Suddenly, Thomas disappeared.

Gone.

What the hell?

But then his uncle's voice continued, as if he were still standing there next to him.

"A Subtractive Holography Invisibility Zinger. Here, let me help you put it on."

Suddenly, the device in Drake's hand flew out of his hand and hovered up to his xtphn and attached itself.

"It makes you invisible," Thomas's voice continued. Go to your Eyelid Menu and open the message I've just sent you. There's an attachment. Open it. Do it now. We don't have much time. The power will only be out for a few minutes. If we're here when it comes back on, you and I are both dead."

Drake, still a bit confused, complied. He shut his eyes. He focus-clicked "Messages." There was a new one from his uncle. He opened it. There was a pop-up. "MESSAGE CONTAINS EXECUTABLE. FILE MAY BE HARMFUL. RUN EXECUTABLE?" Drake focus-clicked "Yes."

Shit! What had he just done?!

"What was that?" Drake asked.

"Now, you're invisible."

Drake looked down. Holy god! He couldn't see his own body!

Oh yeah. Subtractive Holography. The technology used in those fashionable skinny holo-faces, the ones that erase parts of the chubby wubbies' faces and make it look like they have a primitive head. So apparently this S.H.I.Z. attachment holojected down, while the xtphn holojected up, both effectively passing the light from everything around them in every direction, making them invisible.

"Is there any way they can detect that we are using these?"

"Only with a S.H.I.T."

"With a what?"

"A Subtractive Holography Invisibility Tracer."

"And do they have a S.H.I.T.?"

"No, I have the only S.H.I.T. in existence, and I've stashed it where they will never find it."

"Which is…?"

"In my underwear. Now, quick. Use your Location Spoofer and set your location to this room."

The Location Spoofer, at least, was something Drake was familiar with. He had used it many times. He closed his eyes, and used the Eyelid Menu to do as he was told. Now the government would see his location as here in this room, no matter where he went.

"Done," Drake said.

"Now quick, we need to get the hell out of Purgatory while we still can. Put your hand on my shoulder, and don't let go. I'll guide you out. And don't make a peep."

Drake proceeded to get the hell out of...

Well...

Hell.

Drake and Thomas had exited the building unnoticed and begun walking immediately towards what Thomas had called "The Rendezvous Point."

His uncle had rescued him from the judgment of the Corporate Saviors. But this fact didn't necessarily make up for decades of complete radio silence after receiving the cryptic email. He still had a lot of explaining to do. Could he really be trusted? Was this just another harebrained scheme? How could you trust someone you knew almost nothing about, kin or not?

When Drake had put the Reality Cube in the backpack, he noticed that Thomas had put some other items in there. A few mental cables, granola bars, water bottles, and some external microcells. What did they need those for? Modern electronics were all equipped with internal cold fusion microcells and could run for years without recharging. What were they going to charge with these external microcells?

They were nearing one of the busiest McArtificial's in the center of the Zone. "Where are we going?" Drake whispered to Thomas.

"Where else? The most popular fast food chain," Thomas's voice whispered back. Drake couldn't see his uncle, but his hand had been on his shoulder since they left the Department of Salvation.

"But…why such a heavily trafficked area?"

"Haven't you ever heard the expression 'hide in plain sight'?"

As they neared the building, Drake looked up at the huge hologram of Jack McHartattack standing haughtily on top of the restaurant of which he was Corporate Saving Officer, spreading his hands down at the fast food joint as if offering Holy Manna to all below. The man looked like a complete nutjob. He had tattooed his body years ago to look like a clown. He was the one Corporate Savior who didn't wear a silver toga. Instead, he sported a royal blue and magenta clown suit replete with magenta gloves and clown shoes. His crazy mop of hair, clown nose, and mouth were all blood red. His skin was white as a cadaver.

God damn these psychos, Drake thought as he looked at the clown leering down on him. Then he realized something. I'm still alive. Who knows for how long. Surely the corpols are

out in full force looking for us. But that means at least I've still got a chance of taking one of those bastards down with me. Maybe he hadn't failed in his lifelong ambition to take down the Corporate Saviors after all. But he needed to figure out his uncle's game. He needed to see if his uncle was in.

But things had just gotten a lot more complicated. He had just barely escaped with his life. How was he going to avenge his father's death now? Now that he had lost the element of surprise… It would be much more difficult, yes. But maybe not impossible…

Upon entering the crowded restaurant, they went straight to the restrooms. They entered adjacent stalls.

"Now, let's turn this S.H.I.Z. off. I need you to wear this holo-face I'm sending you." Thomas whispered.

Drake closed his eyes. He now had an icon which read "S.H.I.Z. On," in the bottom right corner of his field of vision. He focus-clicked it, and it switched to "S.H.I.Z. Off." He checked his email. There was another email from Thomas, this time with two attachments.

"What's the second attachment for?"

"Fake government ID. Open both attachments, and let's go."

Drake did as told. As they exited the stalls, he noticed that Thomas's head had been transformed into a cartoony-looking hamster head with sparkly green eyes. The hamster's mouth moved in sync with Thomas's as he whispered with a squeeky hamster voice, "Since our IDs show we're still in Purgatory, we need these ones. If the Cloud saw two people walking around without IDs it would instantly report them." Holo-face programs took outgoing impulses from the brain controlling the vocal cords and facial muscles, and replicated them using the projected hologram, while simultaneously projecting a synthetic voice from the speakers built into the front of the xtphn.

As they passed the mirror, Drake looked at his reflection.

He was now a cartoon princess with red hair, aqua eyes, and a tiara. Oh, great. Thanks. Next time, can I be the hamster?

They exited the restroom. The hamster head scanned the room. It nodded towards a lone figure sitting in a booth, its head just a giant yellow spherical smiley face with a pince-nez

and top hat. As they approached the booth and sat down, Drake noticed that the body was slightly larger than average, perhaps five-hundred pounds. The smiley face's animated mouth bit ravenously into an enormous burger as juices squished out of it all over the place. Whoever this large person was, they were in the middle of demolishing a Super Size My Body Meal: a McTriple Bypass Burger, which was a two-foot tall burger with three patties, a kilogram each, a gallon of Grimy Greasy Fries, and a gallon of Tar Colored Liquid Sugar. Next to the meal there were also three Frosty Deaths. Drake had once watched a video on cerebralvision about how the sizes of fast food meals had gradually grown since fast food had been invented more than a century ago. It had been a steady curve. Fast food meals were now over five times the size they had been in the 1950's. In fact, the video had mentioned that it was possible to know which era you were in, based on the size of a fast food meal alone.

The hamster head broke the silence with its squeaky voice. "I once mentated a Frosty Death as big as a house."

"Oh, yeah?" The smiley face replied, in between attacking the burger and washing it down with TarC. It was a silly, high-pitched, male cartoon voice. "And how did it taste?"

"Like shit. I wish they'd fix the tastestreams so everything tasted like it does in real life. If they did, I'd just sit around all day eating Frosty Deaths and pizza."

What the hell were they going on about? Drake was silent, not wanting to find out what his holo-face's voice sounded like. But then he realized…that bit about a Frosty Death must have been some kind of code phrase.

The smiley face laughed. "I brought along a few cables. How bout after I finish this up, the three of us hop in some IM and I show you that new space shuttle I built?"

"Sure, sounds groovy," The hamster head replied. Several of the other restaurant patrons were already hooked together. Ultrahigh bandwidth Imaginative Mentation in public places was one of the more popular pastimes.

As the smiley face continued gobbling down the humongous meal, Drake wondered what the hell they were doing here, while the corpols were no doubt combing the city for them.

Finally, his meal and Frosty Deaths finished, the smiley face plugged two shiny cables into his cervical inputs, one connected to either side of his neck. He then held one of the cables out to Drake, and the other to Thomas. The S.H.I.Z. unit had standard inputs for passing through data to the xtphn, so a mental cable could be plugged in without removing it. Drake accepted the cable and plugged it in. He closed his eyes. On his Eyelid Menu, he saw a pop-up window, "Accept MindLink invitation from left port?" He focus-clicked on "Yes."

Suddenly his Eyelid Menu was gone, and he was standing atop a large castle tower, near the edge, looking out over a woodland below. He was in his athletic body. A rather young-looking and in shape man with grey hair stood next to him. His uncle's primitive avatar. Nearby, an African American man with platinum cornrows leaned against the parapet, looking out over the vast expanse of forest and fog. He donned a black fedora with a burgundy sash around it, a three-piece wine-colored zoot suit, and gator-skin shoes. Slim, muscular build. His eyes looked mechanical. They were completely black, except a bright red horizontal line in the middle. He stood there flipping a silver coin, a huge grin on his face. His teeth sparkled. They had the appearance of being made completely out of diamond. He spoke. "Welcome to my crib in SimWorld."

This must be him, Drake realized. The smiley face going crazy on the food.

"Nice joint," Thomas said. Now everyone was talking in a normal voice. Thomas's eyes were scanning the place, the look on his face showing that he was genuinely impressed.

Drake looked around. In front of the castle, a man with a waxed mustache and Victorian suit rode a penny-farthing through the air. Further away, a woman was flying a DaVincian-looking hang glider. He looked back towards the castle rooftop behind them. All around there were various performers. Acrobats doing long lines of somersaults. A man on a unicycle juggling flaming skulls. A jester eating a sword. And high above them, circus acrobats, swinging and flipping from one set of ropes with rings on the end to another, or walking along tightropes. The tightropes and ropes supporting the rings weren't connected to anything. There were also waterfalls dropping out of nowhere, the water vanishing before they hit the roof of the castle.

Standing nearby, a butler with a grey mustache and black tuxedo noticed Thomas and Drake. He walked up to them.

"Can I get either of you anything?"

"We're fine," Thomas reassured the butler.

The man with the platinum cornrows spoke up. "These are my sprites. Don't worry, we're alone here, the three of us." When he talked, the red horizontal lines on his eyes shrank down to mere points, then expanded again, in time with his words.

Sprites. Inhuman entities controlled by AI. Creatable and customizable by the user. Drake, Thomas, and this man were the only three real human beings in this place.

The cornrowed man caught the coin he had been flipping on his hand. It promptly disappeared and was replaced by another object. The new object looked like a red and green dartboard. He casually tossed it over his head, as if throwing a basketball. It arced up into the air above Drake and Thomas. At its zenith, it split into two exact replicas of itself, each of which continued falling and landed in Drake and Thomas's hands. Drake knew what this was. Private MindLink. One of the Hacking Tools.

Drake looked at the dartboard and thought, "Run." This was how you ran programs in here. The dartboard pulsed in his hands and there was a faint chime, indicating that it had activated. Then it faded away. His uncle had done the same. But then Drake realized something.

"Wait a minute," Drake said, looking at his uncle's primitive avatar accusingly. "Does this shit even work? Remember what happened to me?" Drake had used Private MindLink with Kristal, and somehow the government had found out.

"Don't worry," Thomas said. "It works. We're all clear now."

"Then how did I get caught?" Drake snarled.

"The woman, Silverberg. Did she have the Hacking Tools?"

"Yes! I mean…she took them from me."

"And did you teach her how to set them up properly?"

Fuck. He had forgotten that part.

"Um, well…"

"When I heard what happened to you, the first thing I did was look up the government records. The MindLink session itself was secure. But if a user hasn't set up their ThoughtCloak

properly, then the *memory* of that MindLink session won't be secure. I explained that in the email I sent you. I checked. She didn't set up ThoughtCloak properly. She thought she had, but she hadn't. A scraper picked up one of her memories of your MindLink session."

Shit! It had been years since he had read that email. How was he supposed to remember all that? But his uncle was right. He remembered now setting up his ThoughtCloak all those years ago, how tedious and complex that initial setup had been. Tricking the entire system of Corporate Salvation was no easy task. It couldn't be done at the simple focus-click of a button. He should have explained everything to her. But when she snatched his memories and the tools and then made love to him, his mind had been somewhere else entirely.

His uncle went on. "And since she stole all your memories, the government has them now too."

God damn it! She had plucked out all his memories in their entirety, including the ones that had been shielded from the Corporate Saviors by the Hacking Tools. Now they were unsecure. That explained why Wolfe had known about Drake's desire to kill the Saviors and bring down their system of Corporate Salvation. Perhaps his virtual tryst alone could have been forgiven. He was one of the best fixers, after all. But this changed the situation entirely.

Son of a—! I knew I couldn't trust that woman! Drake lamented. Dealing with her had thrown off his mojo, had made him careless. Why the fuck did she have to go and steal my memories, put me on the defensive? None of this would have happened if it hadn't been for her damn special powers. Drake had hoped her powers could help him in his fight against the Saviors. But apparently they were a two-edged sword.

Two edges. Like Drake's heart at this moment. Torn between two diametrically opposed feelings towards this woman. Just as much as she pissed him the fuck off while he wasn't with her, so did she also seem to magically solve every problem while he was with her. During their short, spectacular time together, he had felt his life had new purpose, new hope. He had begun to feel like maybe he had more to live for than avenging his father. More than killing. More than anger. He couldn't figure her out. She was like a flame, and he was the moth. If he got close to her again, he was sure he would get

burned again. But he still couldn't resist her pull...

"OpSec," Thomas explained. "That's what the ancient military called it. Operational Security. From now until we get out, that has to be our number one priority. A tool is no better than its user."

ThoughtCloak automatically detected and lifted out one's badthoughts and replaced them, using an AI algorithm, with one's own goodthoughts from other moments, but recomposed to seem unique, extrapolating in real time other possible thoughtstreams the user could realistically be having. A godsend in a techno-totalitarian society.

If set up properly, the memory of Private MindLink sessions was also added to the "Cloaked" portion of the user's brain. But was the ThoughtCloak even equipped to handle situations like this? A woman who could steal all of someone's memories? In a society such as this, where no one's thoughts were secure from the government, she was a time bomb waiting to go off.

Wait...his uncle had mentioned the scrapers. How did he know about the scrapers? Not even the mentists knew about them...But his curiosity would have to wait. Right now their priority had to be how in the hell they were going to survive with the whole fucking system of Corporate Salvation on the lookout for them.

"Okay, fine. It was my fault for not fully educating her. So apparently that means we can assume the Hacking Tools work as expected. Which means we can finally talk now," Drake said. "Now would one of you mind telling me what the hell is going on?"

Thomas gestured towards the man with cornrows. "Drake, this man is known as the Gatherer."

"Oh, great. The Gatherer. Real cryptic. Do you have a name?"

The man replied, "Only the Gatherer. I'm the starting point of freedom here in the Corporate Zone."

The Gatherer snapped his fingers.

And everything went dark.

The castle, the acrobats, the waterfalls, the forest... everything was gone.

Suddenly, a beam of light shot out in the darkness. The Gatherer had mentated a high power flashlight. He swept the beam this way and that, illuminating their surroundings.

They were now inside a massive cave, which stretched out into the distance in either direction.

"This," the Gatherer said, "is the Crypto Railroad."

Crypto. From the ancient Greek "Kryptos," meaning concealed, private, hidden. The hidden railroad.

He went on. "This tunnel was created by the first Crypto Railroader. He was able to hack into and take over an excavator, one of the huge machines the Corporate Saviors use to build the tunnels linking their underground bunkers together."

"Underground bunkers?"

"Oh, yeah. You're new to all this. It's hard to imagine the nephew of Thomas Lively not knowing about this stuff. Thomas, didn't you fill him in?"

"Haven't had time. I just barely rescued him from Hell."

Underground bunkers. So that was why the Corporate Saviors had a network of tunnels, like evil Conspiracy Theorists who had been painlessly ended had alluded to.

"But, not everyone makes it to freedom," the Gatherer said. "The excavator didn't make it all the way. And neither did the first Crypto Railroader."

The Gatherer made a pointing motion forward with one flat, open hand, and suddenly the three of them were moving through the tunnel at hundreds or perhaps even thousands of miles per hour, as they stood there, still, without a vehicle. Suddenly they stopped at what appeared to be the end of the tunnel. In front of them lay a gigantic machine with treads. Off to one side of the tunnel, there was a hydraulic lift. Above the lift, Drake could make out a round shape with stars inside of it. The exit.

"As you can see, the excavator broke down here. This is the end of the line. From here, you'll have to hoof it. And that means walk your fatass to freedom. The first Crypto Railroader didn't make it. But nowadays we have a lot more people as part of our network that will guide you to freedom."

All of this bothered him. If there was a way to make it to freedom, why hadn't his uncle told him about it before? And what was this about "hoofing" it? Wasn't that that crazy thing the primitives did called "hiking"? What the fuck kind of cuckoo escapade was his uncle taking him on?

The Gatherer snapped his fingers, and the three of them were back on top of the castle, overlooking the foggy forest. The acrobats were performing, and the butler stood ready to attend them. The Gatherer held out his hand and suddenly the silver coin appeared once again and he began flipping it, a huge smile on his face, looking out into the fog.

"Wait a minute!" Drake piped up. "How do you expect us to make it to freedom if your first Crypto man didn't even make it? And what about you? If this Crypto Railroad leads to what you call freedom, why wouldn't you want to use it yourself? Are you trying to sell us on some crazy journey even you aren't willing to go on yourself?"

Thomas reached out and put a hand on Drake's shoulder, trying to calm him down. "Drake, listen to me—"

Drake batted his uncle's hand away. "I want to hear it from the horse's mouth. If we're going to trust this guy and his crazy tunnel, he needs to be able to explain it himself."

Thomas turned to the Gatherer, "I'm sorry, this was—"

"No need to apologize. I run into situations like this all the time. The man has valid questions, which I am more than happy to answer. I'm the one who chose this job, and I have no problem carrying it out."

The Gatherer flipped the coin in a wide arc towards Drake. Drake reached out and caught it.

Then he looked Drake in the eye with those mechanical black eyes of his, the glowing red line shrinking and expanding. "The truth is, Drake, I'm not trying to get you to do anything. If you want to stay here, that's your prerogative. And if you do decide to take the Crypto Railroad to freedom, I warn you now, yours is a path that will be fraught with peril."

Drake didn't like where this was going. He looked at the coin in his hand. On one side, there was a "T" scratched onto the surface. On the other side, an "F."

"What the hell is this?"

"This coin is to remind me that there is only ever one choice: tyranny, or freedom. The choice is simple, Drake. Do you want to stay shackled to your Corporate Saviors, or do you want to cut the chain that binds you?"

"I want to take down the system of Corporate Salvation altogether," Drake breathed hoarsely.

The Gatherer just laughed. “And how are you gonna do that, while you’re still shackled to your Saviors?”

Drake tried to think of a good comeback, but couldn’t. “And what about my question? Why aren’t you going on this trip yourself?”

“The answer is simple. I stayed behind because I’m addicted to the food.” He mentated a McTriple Bypass Burger in his hand in front of him, and then took a bite out of it. He immediately spat it out, and threw the burger over the parapet, down to the forest below. “Stuff tastes like shit in here. But it tastes so good out there. That’s what most people live for nowadays. Artificial reality. And artificial, bullshit food. I know I’m going to die early, thanks to our Corporate Saviors. But I can’t help myself. I’m addicted.”

“Maybe you could quit,” Thomas said hopefully. “People even get over addiction to hard drugs.”

“Nah, this addiction’s worse. Ain’t nothing gonna cure me of my love affair with unhealthy food. Maybe if I had been born a century ago, or hell, better yet, thousands of years ago, like my hunter-gatherer ancestors in Africa, I’d be a healthy man. But thanks to slavery, colonialism, and the wonders of ‘advanced civilization,’ I’m trapped inside the prison that is my body. But it doesn’t matter. I’m happy. I’m helping out the cause in my own way. Because of me, people are making it to freedom. We need somebody here, to connect people with the outside. And that somebody is me. And I’ll keep on doing it until my body breaks down and dies from all this toxic, delicious shit I eat every day. It may seem like I’ve chosen tyranny. But, even though I may not be able to overcome my own addiction, I’ve chosen to fight tyranny in my own way. Each of us is different. Each of us has to choose how we’ll fight against tyranny. Or if we’ll even fight it at all.”

Drake made as if to toss the coin back to the Gatherer.

But the Gatherer said, “Keep it. I have another one.” He then held out his hand and immediately another coin, exactly the same as the first, appeared. He began flipping it. He was grinning again.

“So…which will it be? Comfortable slavery, or dangerous freedom?”

Drake looked down at the coin in his hand as he thought

about the Gatherer's words. He definitely wanted to be free from the Corporate Saviors. At least, he didn't want to have to obey them. He had made a career working for one of them. He had thought that sometimes a slave needed to stay chained to his master in order to stay close enough to destroy him. But perhaps the longer a slave stays chained to his master, the less he wants to destroy him. Perhaps he longs for that master which puts food in his belly. Like a dog on a chain. Well-fed. Tame. Domestic. That's what society was made up of. A bunch of well-tamed dogs.

He shook his head. This was all academic. If Drake stayed in the Corporate Zone, with the Corporate Police out to get him, he would have neither comfortable slavery nor dangerous freedom.

He would be sent to Hell. An eternity of torment. An eternity seeing Wolfe's face etched into his mind forever, knowing he had failed his father.

So, the choice was easy.

He had no choice.

"I don't get it," Drake said, pocketing the coin. "You'd think it would be child's play, for the GG to find and shut down this tunnel."

"Our Glorious Government still hasn't found the entrance or exit, thanks to your uncle's mental viruses, but they know the general area where fugitives have been making a trek by foot, way out in the Unsaved Zone. And they patrol that area. In fact, seems they've built some kind of base or prison where they take captured fugitives. You can ask your uncle about that. But the point is this is dangerous business, the Crypto Railroad. No guarantee you'll make it all the way."

"Wait. Mental virus? What's that?"

"I'll explain later, Drake." Thomas said. "For now we need to focus on making it to freedom."

Oh, so my wonderful uncle is going to explain something, Drake thought. Disappears for twenty fucking years without explaining a thing, and now he's ready to spill his guts. Now that it doesn't fucking matter. Now that I'm dead meat. Drake was disgusted by the situation. If his uncle knew all this stuff, why hadn't he been there to tell him before? Why had he just left him on his own to royally fuck things up?

"Wow," the Gatherer said. "I'm surprised. Your uncle told me you're a fixer. So even shadow operatives like you don't know about mental viruses. Perhaps our Glorious Government doesn't want you guys to realize how weak and fragile their system really is. A mental virus is something your uncle created. Spreads through the Net and attacks people's memories. Nobody can remember where the entrance and exit of the Crypto Railroad are. Back in the primitive days of the Net, something like that wouldn't have been possible. But thanks to our minds now being physically connected to the Net, anything's possible..."

How did this man know about the fixers? It didn't make any sense. He was supposed to be the elite operative. He was supposed to be the one who was in on all the secrets. But now he felt like he was the outsider, perplexed as ever at hearing all of this.

"Nobody can remember? But how do you—"

"Nobody except, of course, those of us with the MindLink Hacking Tools. We're all grateful to Thomas for writing those."

Drake suddenly remembered the one program in the suite that he hadn't figured out the purpose of. CounterVirus. He had thought it was for computer viruses. The menu options had been cryptic and didn't make any sense. But now they are telling me there are viruses that attack the human mind?

Wait...what did he just say? My uncle wrote the Hacking Tools? And there were other people using them? Who? Where? Why had he been kept in the dark about so many things?

"We need to use these Hacking Tools, and these meetings, not to run away, but to bring down the Corporate Saviors and their entire system!" Drake suddenly declared, a gleam in his eye.

Thomas interjected, "Fools rush in where angels fear to tread, Drake. First, we need to secure our own safety."

Drake stood there, thinking. How could he convince his uncle, who he barely knew, and this man, who he didn't know at all? He realized at that point that the place where he felt the calmest, coolest, and most confident was sitting in the Reality Matrix, fixing people's reality. He had spent so much of his life inside a simulation, and so little actually communicating with

people in the real world. Or even with people inside the sim, like he was now. He was a shadow. He was a mind ninja. But a communicator, he was not. He realized he had much to learn if he wanted to take down the Corporate Saviors. He had to learn to communicate effectively. Otherwise, he stood no hope of enlisting others to his cause.

He wanted to go further, but felt like he was at an impasse, at least for the moment, with his frontal blitz strategy. But since he had finally found some tentative "allies," he decided to tell them about the other potential ally. "There's one other thing I have to tell you about. There's a woman. I must take her with me. I feel she's…like us." Like us? Was Drake alike with his uncle and the Gatherer in any more than just wanting to escape the control of the Corporate Saviors?

"Like us?"

"I mean…she likes freedom, and I know she doesn't want to follow the Corporate Savior's rules."

The truth is, as dangerous as she was, Drake had started thinking about Kristal ever since his uncle had freed him. Call it hormones, call it lust, call it whatever you want. But it had to be admitted that she at least was a potential ally. But if he approached her now, inviting her away on the Crypto Railroad, she could easily call him crazy, or worse, turn them all in as fugitives.

But, his entire life had been changed because of her. He was unwilling to accept the notion that, after once being in heaven between her legs, he would never again replicate the act. In the primitive action film running in his mind, he mowed down the Corporate Saviors with a machine gun, blew up the Departments of Thought Management and Salvation and all their other damned fortresses of power, and made off with Kristal, plugged into her cervical input and ravaged her hot primitive body in MindWorld happily ever after.

In fact, for some reason, she seemed like the most important thing to him now. He now remembered that after he had last seen her, he had been in some kind of crazed stupor, a kind of monomania. And now, even being caught and sent to Hell by their Glorious Government seemed worth it if he could just have one more session of secret mind sex.

God damn it! His thoughts were running wild. He suddenly

felt as if he hadn't grown up emotionally since he graduated from Govly Academy when he was sixteen. But…he suddenly realized…if sex is what we really want to do, really are constituted to do in a normal, natural environment, then how could one really grow up in a totalitarian society, where the sex instinct was beaten out of you and chemicals were given you to obliterate your hormones? He suddenly realized that he lived in a society of emotional retards. Of kids. Not adults. All dependent on their Corporate Saviors like a baby is dependent on its mother's tit. And he had been one of them. Up until he met Kristal and everything changed.

Thinking of Kristal made another thought flash through his brain. What's going to happen to her? They had found out about her memories and their tryst. Perhaps they had even already damned her soul to Hell. But she was a Reality Mediator! A star! The public depended on her. Surely they'd cut her some slack. Drake realized that Wolfe had probably had it in for him for a while now, and had used this opportunity to make his move. But where Drake was a man and a ninja, lurking in the shadows of society, doing the government's bidding, Kristal was both a woman and a star. Yes, Drake had been expendable. They'll find another fixer. He might not do as good of a job as Drake, but they would find one nonetheless. But Kristal mediated holy reality from on high down to the masses. They needed her. Surely they wouldn't get rid of her.

Suddenly he noticed that his uncle's face had turned serious. "Drake, I—"

But the Gatherer spoke up. "Look, I'm helping you because of your uncle. Anyone else, and they have to go through a very detailed vetting process, to make sure we can trust them, and they aren't a government agent. The process could take weeks, or even longer. So I can take you now, as we agreed. But if you want your friend to go, we need to take all the normal precautions. We are only as strong as the weakest link in our chain. Even one individual could bring our whole operation down. We here at Crypto Railroad are in the business of not getting caught, so we can continue to help people make it to freedom."

"But—" God damn it! Why had this all happened to him at once? He needed more time. But time was something he didn't have.

To be able to make love to Kristal…even just one more time. It would be like a dream come true. Damn it! It was just like his life, to finally get what he wanted, and then to have to give it all up.

Just then, he received a message. He opened it. The message read,

YOUR MENTAL RECORDS HAVE BEEN FOUND TO CONTAIN SUSPICIOUS CONTENT. PLEASE REPORT TO YOUR MENTAL CLINIC AS SOON AS POSSIBLE.

What? How had this happened? Even with the new government ID?

Drake sighed. He felt like there was an ever growing rift between him and his uncle. He wanted to ask him about the message, but he realized that whatever his uncle told him at this point, he wouldn't believe him. Disappearing and then reappearing after two decades—in a situation like this, trust could take a long time to develop, if it ever did.

But, as always, he was fucked. Just my life, Drake thought. To never get what I want. He knew only one thing. He needed to get out of there, and get out of there now.

"Drake," Thomas said. "We really need to—"

Drake put up a hand, silencing his uncle. "Okay, I understand the risks involved. Let's just get out of here as soon as possible."

"No problem, boss," the Gatherer said. "Now, I just need to use the restroom and then I can take the two of you to the entrance point in my hovercar. Let me remind you that I did just eat a bunch of that delicious McArtificial's, so this might take a while."

Drake sat in the booth, waiting for the Gatherer, not speaking to his uncle, grateful for the thin holographic mask hiding his true emotions. There was an icy cold silence between them.

Maybe he was being unfair to his uncle. He had just saved him from the eternal fires of damnation, after all. But, he reminded himself sternly, his uncle had also been the one who had gotten him into the situation that had almost been his undoing. His uncle had gotten him the job as fixer, and had given him the Hacking Tools that allowed him to have virtual

sex with Kristal. So, long story short, if it hadn't been for his uncle, he wouldn't be running scared for his life from the GG right now, he reasoned. He'd be sitting comfortably at home on his reinforced nanocouch in the sims or watching CRV. Wait…cerebralvision…what time was it? Perhaps he could catch a glimpse of Kristal.

He reached for the handy cerebralvision button on his xtphn. Drake had always thought cerebralvision was kind of weird. It felt like floating in space while watching and listening to a giant flat projection which took up all of your mental vision. It projected only in two senses: audio and visual. No smells, tastes, or sense of touch. Kind of jarring compared to the 3D, 5-sense full-immersion realism of the sims. Oh, well. He pressed the button. Suddenly McArtificial's disappeared and was replaced by an image filling his mind. It was a documentary about Govly Academy. They were having naptime. A bunch of pudgy kids were lying on their stomachs on the floor. Out of each child's neck protruded a shiny mental cable which ran all the way to a big, menacing metal box on the Govly Maker's desk. The Indoctrination Box, which looked like a square octopus, connected to the plethora of cables. Colorful lights flowed outward from the box along the cables towards the children's necks as they slept. Behind the metallic octopus the Govly Maker sat, a ginormous pale woman with black horn-rimmed glasses, tapping on a holographic screen in front of the box. Drake knew that she was feeding indoctrination into the young vatlings' minds. Behind the narration and cheesy government documentary music, he could hear the hum of people chatting and eating their greasy McArtificial's food.

On the xtphn there were also handy buttons to change CRV channels. He flipped through channels until he got to CSN.

Kristal's co-anchor was announcing something. But he didn't see Kristal anywhere…

"Breaking news!" The reporter with too much mousse said. Suddenly a still image of Kristal's face appeared next to the reporter. "Kristal Silverberg, former Reality Mediator, has been lobotomized due to dangerous Conspiracy Theories which were a threat to our Glorious Government and citizens everywhere."

What? How could this have happened? For Conspiracy

Theories? Or was that just the story they were giving the public, and really it had been because of their cybertryst?

God damn those fucking bastards!

First, they had taken away his father. And now they had taken away the one person that could have given meaning to his life.

Now he knew he had nothing else to live for here, in the Corporate Zone. Without the help of a strong network of allies willing to go through with it, he had no chance of bringing down the Corporate Saviors all by himself. And he knew that his uncle and this man were not those allies. He had failed. And sooner or later they would find him. Probably sooner. And so, he had one option left…

Live.

Bare survival.

At this point, that was the best he could hope for.

He had lost everything.

So he sat there in silence, not speaking with his uncle, watching the CRV like a zombie. It was fitting. He was already dead.

Several hours later, when the Gatherer was done shitting out his food addiction, Drake was more ready than ever to get the hell out of there.

Just as the Gatherer was coming out of the restroom, suddenly four Corporate Police busted into the restaurant with laser guns drawn.

One of them took over the restaurants' systems with his intphn. None of the corpols' mouths moved as they walked among the tables looking around with their black-visored faces and one of them projected his voice using his mind to the intercom speakers. "Citizens, stay calm. This is the Corporate Police. We are searching for a violent criminal. No one is allowed to leave this restaurant until we are satisfied that the criminal is not here. If everyone cooperates, we can get out of here a lot quicker."

Oh, god. He could feel it.

That submissive feeling.

They were taking over everyone's intphns and digital roofying them. Fuck...Not again...

As the corpols walked through the tables, eying people, asking some of them questions, Drake had the sudden urge to turn himself in. God damn it! No! That stuff's fucking with my mind! Drake continued wrestling with himself. Every moment felt like an eternity. It felt like any second now he would slip up, do something stupid, and they would be done for.

One of the corpols came to the table where Drake sat with Thomas. He looked suspiciously at Drake. He signalled to the others to come over.

Shit. They've found us. Drake suddenly had the impulse to put his arms up in a submissive gesture, waiting to be cuffed. No! This can't happen again! I won't let it!

Now all four corpols had surrounded them.

One of the corpols nodded towards Drake and Thomas with his black visor. "Citizens, turn off your holo-faces at once."

Suddenly, Drake reached over to the booth next to them, across some startled citizen, and took her pitcher-sized cup full of Tar Colored Liquid Sugar. With every ounce of his strength, he warded off the digital drug flowing through his synapses. With a herculean effort, he hurled the TarC at the corpol's faces.

For a brief moment, everyone in the restaurant stared in horror as the tar-like, toxic liquid arced through the air, individual droplets breaking off from the stream and shimmering like black diamonds.

Suddenly, the liquid hit all four corpols' faces with full force. All in unison, they let out a shriek as their nanoglas visors began to melt, noxious gases pouring forth from their faces, clutching their burning eyes as they cried out in pain.

"Now!" Thomas shouted.

Drake knew what to do. He instantly closed his eyes and focus-clicked on the words in the corner of his field of vision.

S.H.I.Z. On!

Suddenly, he could see his body disappearing, right after Thomas's. For a brief moment he worried about the Gatherer. But out of the corner of his eye he caught the Gatherer disappearing, too. Good. His uncle apparently had given him a S.H.I.Z., too. Or he already had one. Either way…

All three of them were now invisible.

The three men promptly made their getaway, leaving the corpols howling in pain as the poisonous corporate liquid ate into their eyeballs.

INVENTOR'S THOUGHTSTREAM: CORPORATE ASSET

The operation had been a success. Thank god. But not before one last neuro daydream. The one with that ominous, bone-chilling image that had been haunting him ever since. Those monolithic Corporate Saviors, controlling everyone like marionettes. But that had been a few days ago, and thankfully he hadn't had another neuro daydream since. He was cured.

With an extremely heavy heart, the inventor stared at the holographic screen in front of him. On it was his letter of resignation. His finger wavered over the send button.

It had been too much. First the grueling, exhausting experience of finally finishing his magnum opus, MindLink. And then, that nightmare that was Neuro Daydream Disorder. Near the end, he had been having two or three neuro daydreams an hour. His mind had been pressed to the point of breaking. He had almost gone insane. He needed to rest. He needed to recuperate.

And he needed time to think about his life. And then he could start over. There was no reason to stay working on the MindLink project. He had already accomplished what he set out to do, and had also stayed around to work out the bugs. MindLink was a success. It was working properly now. He could start some new project, his next big invention. He would find some other research company. He was the biggest name now in cybernetics. He wouldn't be lacking for job offers. He could have his pick of the litter. But for now, he needed time. He needed healing from his taxing mental ordeal.

He pressed the send button on the holographic screen. Then, after a long pause to look around at the lab he had spent so many grueling hours working in, he started to pack his things.

His boss, the Corporate Savior, had seemed quite pleased that he had found the bug and fixed it. He wanted to begin mass production as soon as possible. Good. He could leave on upbeat terms, with nothing unresolved. In fact, his boss had been so pleased, he had hinted at giving him a raise. But, it didn't matter. The inventor had made up his mind.

Suddenly, in the middle of his musings, the door of the lab burst open and five or six Corporate Police came rushing in,

grabbing him coarsely and forcing a pair of handcuffs onto him.

"For heaven's sakes! What's going on? I demand an explanation!" the inventor declared. The handcuffs were digging into his wrists. A corpol on either side of him held him roughly by each arm.

Right then, his boss walked into the lab.

"What is going on is that you are being detained."

"What?! This is outrageous! How? Why? What have I done?"

"You are guilty of hacking the emails of Corporate Saviors, an offense punishable by death. But, as a Savior, I am full of mercy and grace. And so, I have decided to let you live. And to continue working for me, on whatever project I see fit."

God damn it! How had they found out about his extracurricular activities? But it didn't matter. This wasn't how you treated someone who revolutionized the way the world works.

"Without me, you wouldn't even have MindLink, the tool that you plan to enslave all of mankind with! Why don't you just let me go, and I'll stay silent about your plans, and we'll call it even?"

The Savior laughed. "Oh, I think you'll learn to see that you are a Corporate asset. You do not have the choice of whether to continue to work or not."

"Do you really think I'll want to keep making technology for you after pulling a stunt like this?"

"Oh, I have ways of motivating you. In fact, thanks to you and your MindLink, I've been able to develop an all-new application, a very effective one at teaching bad employees how to behave," the Savior said with a sardonic grin. He seemed to be enjoying this.

"What the hell are you talking about?" What application had he developed so soon for MindLink? And why hadn't he, MindLink's inventor, been informed about it?

"But as I said, I am full of grace. So I'll give you one chance. And then, it's out of my hands. So…will you continue to work for me of your own choosing?"

"Absolutely not! I'll go public with what I learned from those emails. You won't get away with this!"

"Okay, don't say I didn't give you a chance."

The Savior nodded to the police.

The corpols roughly pulled the inventor out of the room and took him to the Corporate Police Station.

And that was when the hell started.

That was when he found out about the special software they had written for MindLink.

A special torture application, especially for use by the police. They left him plugged into it for several hours, during which time electrical signals were sent through his central nervous system, telling his brain that his body was experiencing extreme physical anguish, as if all his limbs were being hacked off and all his bones crushed, all at the same time.

After a few hours of this, he relented.

His boss showed up, a huge smile on his face. “Good, I knew you’d see things my way.”

The inventor was speechless. He could barely even think, barely knew what day it was, who he was. All he could think about was the several lifetimes of pain and torture which had been compressed down into a few hours, completely breaking him.

“Now come on, I’m taking you to your new home.”

CHAPTER 17: THE CRYPTO RAILROAD

Blayze had eaten the mushrooms, and not died. Whew. And he had waited all day. Not a single hovercar. Well, he had fallen asleep for several hours in the middle of the day. But he was pretty sure if a hovercar had come while he was sleeping, he would have heard it. Now it was getting dark. The spotlights turned on.

He stood there, watching the spotlights for some time, not making a move. He noticed the spotlights were moving in a pattern. Hmmm… After several minutes, he had memorized their pattern.

After it was sufficiently dark, he decided now was the time.

Well, here goes nothing.

Blayze started to walk across the clearing, cautiously approaching the camp while avoiding the beams of light slowly making their rounds.

As he got closer, he began to see something very strange. What appeared to be…hordes of people inside the camp, milling about… From afar, he had only been able to make out people standing right near the fence. But now, as he got nearer and nearer, he noticed that something about their movements was strange. They seemed to be walking… mechanically. Slowly, methodically. And they were arranging themselves in patterns, geometric shapes. What the hell was going on here?

He stopped about halfway between the forest and the fence, out of the light of the spotlights. Was this really a good idea, approaching whatever this place was? Whatever was going on in there, it didn't look natural. He started to get a very eerie feeling about this place.

Then he noticed that someone had broken off from the rest of the group and was walking towards the fence…walking towards him! Was this the same person as before? Hm…no weapon…grey clothing like the people milling about. But moving like a normal human being, not like the others. And whoever it was, they seemed to have noticed him! Now the person was standing right on the other side of the fence. And, he noticed, it was in a place the spotlights weren't reaching.

Well, it's now or never.

He started walking towards the person, avoiding the spotlights. He was closing the gap. Now he could almost make

out the person's features. It was a woman! Who was this woman? And why was she the only person who had noticed him out here?

Suddenly he heard a loud "Bing!" in his head. And then the bing was quickly followed by a robotic female voice.

"Now connecting to Mind Grid. Standby, citizen. Now connecting to Mind Grid. Bing! Now connecting to Mind Grid—"

There was a quick flash, a mental image of a woman...a beautiful primitive woman, reaching out to him. He couldn't see her face. There was a light behind her, silhouetting her features.

"Now connecting to Mind Grid. Standby, citizen." It kept ringing and binging in his head. Shit! That was annoying! "Now connecting to Mind Grid. Mind Grid system has detected out-of-date operating system. Smartphone OS currently at 28.6. Minimum required smartphone OS 30.0. Now downloading upgrade...now downloading upgrade...standby, citizen. Now connecting to Mind Grid. Bing! Now connecting to...Download failed. Citizen, you must update your smartphone at once. You have an OS version that is incompatible with Mind Grid. Please update your OS version at once. Our Glorious Government will provide assistance. Please visit any mental clinic or WhirlySnake service center immediately to receive the required upgrade."

Shit! What the hell was going on?

He kept seeing quick glimpses of the primordial woman surrounded by light.

The dark, lonely form waiting behind the fence seemed to raise its arm ever so slightly, as if waving at him. Yes, she's beckoning me to come! Fighting the strange woman trying to take control of his mind, Blayze trundled forward. He had no other choice. Who else could he reach out to, here in this place?

"Now connecting to Mind Grid, now connecting to..." The female robotic voice kept going on and on and on, driving him crazy. God damn it! This is insane! Got to get rid of the voices inside my head! He reached up and yanked off his xtphn.

"Bing! Now connecting to Mind Grid. Standby..." the voice kept rattling away. Shit! Didn't work. It's connecting even to my intphn by itself, he realized. He put the xtphn back on. He

would get in more trouble if he was caught with it off, anyways.

Now that he was closer, he had a better look at the people walking around in strange patterns. They didn't seem to be in control of themselves. Suddenly, something clicked in his mind. He looked up at those menacing surveillance towers spread throughout the installation. He had a closer view of them now, with their chaotic arrays of cables and equipment. The cables were shining with the same rainbow glow of flowing information that the mental cables did when people MindLinked with one another. Datalight. Were the people being controlled by those towers?

Wait! Suddenly he remembered reading ungovly websites about rumored EMF towers that could perform functions similar to those of the mental scaler, but at long range. Could it be that those rumors were true?

Now he was only a few yards away from the fence. He could clearly see the woman now. She motioned him to come close. He looked up at the watchtowers, and the spotlights. She seemed to have chosen a spot where they would both remain in the dark. Smart. And the guards didn't seem to be looking this way. He closed the gap.

"Thank god!" She whispered. "A real human being!"

As Blayze approached the fence, he studied the woman. Good looking features. Auburn hair. Hard to tell the color in the darkness, but light eyes. Loose-fitting, light grey pajamas, like the people walking in mathematical patterns. There was something vaguely familiar about her, but he couldn't place it.

"What is this place?" Blayze whispered back. The robot voice was still droning on in his head, and the binging, ringing and sudden flashes of the strange primitive woman calling out to him continued. He did his best to ignore it and focus on this real woman in front of him.

"This place is called the Mind Grid Smart Community, and it's a top secret prototype being developed by Corporate Savior Ron Wolfe. Those towers up there are controlling these people."

"But what are they doing? Why are they walking around like that?" Bing! He kept being welcomed to Mind Grid. Bing!

"Looks like they've been running tests, making sure they

stay connected and the system works as expected. The last time one of the Corporate Saviors was here was a few weeks ago, and they only had a few of the subjects connected at that time. They probably want to make sure they'll all work as expected the next time a Savior visits. Maybe these patterns are their way of showing off. The camp is run by a psychopath named General Shelton Wagstaffe, a war buddy of Wolfe's. Who knows how these psychos think? Well, I do, to a certain extent. I will say that they look at all these people here, these test subjects, as if they were a shiny new toy they got to play with."

Psychopaths? War buddies? It was like she was talking Greek. She was whispering a hundred miles a minute. Plus it was hard to concentrate with that crazy robot voice in the background. "Wait, slow down. First of all, how did you see me out there, from so far away?" Bing! Welcome to Mind Grid. Bing!

"I was looking around trying to find a way out of here, and then I saw you. Who are you? How did you end up out here in the middle of nowhere?"

"Well, all I know is that I was at my regular mental checkup, and then suddenly I woke up inside some kind of pod, all covered with ooey gooey slime. I was in a trailer truck, but it had an accident. And then I walked here." Bing! Welcome to Mind Grid. Bing!

"They put us in those gel pods too. They must have been transporting you here."

"Why are you out here in the middle of the night? Shouldn't you be sleeping?"

"I saw you earlier, and I figured you would try to make contact at night."

Logical. "What about them?" Blayze nodded towards the people walking in strange patterns.

"I don't know if they even need to sleep. I'm not sure if they can even be classified as human. Just another node on the network..."

"But why aren't you being controlled?"

"It's hard to explain...I'm different. What about you? You should be connected, being this close, but you're not."

"I keep hearing this voice in my mind trying to connect me

to Mind Grid, whatever that is. But it seems I need some update."

"That's right! They gave us an update when we got here. Now I remember! They made a new version of XI OS which makes the smartphone system work with Mind Grid. And you don't have it. That's why you aren't affected. Look, you've got to help me get out of here. We have to warn other people about this. I'm a reporter. And for the first time in my life, I have an opportunity to actually report on something real!"

Maybe that was why she looked familiar. Was she…? But, no, she couldn't be. "But how in the world am I going to help you get out of here? And even if I do, where would we go? How can we survive on our own out here in the wilderness?"

"Again, you'll have to trust me on this. I can't explain how I know all this. But I know that they've been picking up fugitives around here. People trying to escape the Corporate Zone. They don't know exactly how they get here…but see that smaller peak over there? Many of them appear around that area. If you go there, maybe you can find where they are coming from and tell the fugitives about this place, and ask them if they can help us. Trust me, I know more than anybody about this place. If you help me, I can tell you and anyone else everything anybody needs to know about this place."

Fugitives! Was she suggesting they collude with people trying to illegally flee from the Corporate Zone? He was trying to get back to the Corporate Zone, not away from it! Suddenly this didn't seem like a very good idea coming here and talking with this lady.

The woman apparently saw the look of doubt on Blayze's face. "I know this sounds crazy, but you have to believe me. Everything I'm telling you is 100% true. The MindLink equipment, it doesn't work the same for everyone. At least, not for me. When I connect to someone, it's like there's no barrier between our minds. And I…can see all their memories. And I did that to Savior Wolfe. He's the one who had this place built in the first place. And now I have all his memories! So I know that the Corporate Saviors are planning on installing these towers all over the Corporate Zones and turning us all into remote-controlled humans like these test subjects here! Plus, I know about how Wolfe and the other Corporate Saviors have been lying to us and replacing the citizens' sperm with

their own sperm. All of the vat babies are children of the Corporate Saviors! And all of the men in society who think they have children…they don't!"

Shit! What was he getting himself into? This lady's going to get us both killed for treason! Fugitives! Conspiracy Theories! This sort of thing was what got him into trouble in the first place.

"Lady, are you sure you know what you're talking about? Because those are some pretty bold claims. Where's the evidence?"

Blayze knew about the scientific method, which was the opposite of Reality Mediation. One didn't just go and believe in claims, regardless of who made them, without evidence.

"Look around you!" She whispered emphatically. What more evidence do you need?"

Blayze looked at the blank stares of the zombie-like humans walking around behind her. Even though his head was ringing—literally—Blayze thought about the woman's words. If she was right, then the curtain was being lifted before his eyes, and he was being shown…knowledge. The knowledge of real reality. That wasn't exactly what he wanted. That's what had gotten him into this predicament.

On the other hand, he realized that the mediators definitely hadn't said anything about this place. Why? Wasn't it their job to report reality to them? What were they trying to hide? As much as he hated it, this woman had a point. He was now seeing, before his very eyes, another side of reality that they didn't show on cerebralvision.

Damn it! If all this crazy stuff she was talking about was true, they had all the cards stacked against them. They were fucked either way. Everyone knows the Corporate Saviors can read our thoughts, but we can't read theirs. That's why no one can do anything to them. They're untouchable. It's no use trying to rebel. Even having rebellious thoughts is suicide! They'll find out immediately, and then painlessly end us! But wait, what had she said? She was able to see people's memories? It sounded far-fetched. She sounded like someone who was up in the night. But, if two brains are connected via an electronic interface, than in theory perhaps it was possible for one brain to detect the information in the other brain. The

two brains are physically connected…as if they are one. Like two hard drives being connected to a computer. They form a local network and can send and receive data with one another. So could two connected brains transfer data to one another? Was that how she could see other people's memories? But supposedly MindLink technology included failsafe mechanisms—electronic gates, if you will—to prevent that sort of thing from happening. He had read all about it online.

This woman claimed to have the memories of one of the Corporate Saviors. If that was true, then this was the first time in history that someone had surveilled the thoughts of a Corporate Savior, and not the other way around.

What was he thinking? This was all nonsense. This was going to get him killed! Or worse, sent to Hell!

But what choice did he have? What choice had they left him with? Where were his Saviors now? Shit! He couldn't imagine a worse situation.

She apparently could see the inner battle going on inside him. "Look, I'll just tell you! I'm Kristal Silverberg, Reality Mediator! If they can do this to me, put me in this prison, they can do it to anyone! You must help me, I'm telling the truth!"

That was why she looked familiar! Now that she said the name, he did recognize her. Of course, on cerebralvision she was a primitive babe, but the face and the features were clearly hers. Why on earth would they put a Reality Mediator in this godawful place?

Blayze suddenly had a very bad feeling about all of this. What if the worst were true?

What if she was right?

Blayze looked at the mountain she had pointed to, and back at the woman.

Kristal Silverberg, what are you getting me into?

If Drake had been a living dead man before, now his coffin was six feet deeper. And getting deeper by the second. Where was his uncle taking him?

The Gatherer had driven Drake and Thomas in his hovercar to an abandoned factory on the edge of the Corporate Zone. Once inside the factory, the Gatherer had moved some sheet metal to reveal an opening in the ground, equipped with a hydraulic lift. The three of them had taken the lift all the way down, and the Gatherer had taken it back up. The corpols were out in force searching for them, and they needed to avoid them showing up and finding out about this place. And while the three men had been invisible all the way here—the Gatherer using a fresh holo-face while driving—it unfortunately wasn't possible to render the Gatherer's hovercar invisible. So after accompanying them to the extraction point, he had made a quick exit.

Great. Now they were standing in the middle of a pitch black, dank tunnel with not a soul in sight.

At least Thomas had a flashlight. As the beam rolled over their surroundings, Drake could see that the tunnel was exactly as it had appeared in the sim of the Crypto Railroad which the Gatherer had shown Drake. They had turned their S.H.I.Z. off, so he could see his uncle.

There were magnetic hovertracks running through the tunnel. Most trains were hovertrains nowadays, traveling on a cushion of air. But they still utilized tracks, which kept them magnetically on course.

Drake stood there, shivering from the cold, cursing the day he had ever received the Hacking Tools from his uncle. Wanting to broach the subject of his uncle's mysterious disappearance, and to finally get some answers, Drake began, "So about those —" But he caught himself. Damn it. Even with ThoughtCloak, the Saviors would still get the audio feed from the microphones in their extphns. We need to do a Private MindLink.

But just then he noticed that Thomas was staring at a small light, which had appeared in the distance. It was getting bigger and bigger.

He would have to save his questions for later.

As the light got closer, he realized it was a small railway

maintenance hover vehicle, carrying four or five…what the fuck?

Suddenly he experienced veevee. Veevee was a condition that modern man often felt, that sensation when you aren't sure whether you're in reality or virtuality. It had been dubbed "virtual vertigo." Or simply veevee.

Although he was pretty sure he was in reality, on the maintenance vehicle hovering towards them, it looked like there were…primitive avatars!

What the hell was going on?

Calm down, Drake. Perhaps they're holograms. Ghosts, remember? Like that woman in Purgatory. He breathed, clutching his chest, trying to reorient himself.

"Are those holos? Or are we in…"

But as the holograms got closer and were bathed in the light of Thomas's flashlight, he realized something. Holographic technology had advanced to the point where you couldn't distinguish between holograms and reality, unless you got close enough—a few inches to a foot or so—in which case you'd be able to see from the subtle vibrations and lack of focus that it was artificial. But in some rare situations, jarring visual phenomena caused by not matching some unusual ambient lighting gave holograms away. This was one of those situations which should have given the primitive bodies away as holograms.

Only it didn't.

Holograms didn't reflect ambient light the way real objects did. But the primitive bodies were reflecting the light of Thomas's high-powered beam.

They were real. Either that, or they were in…

Drake tried to mentate a menu in the air in front of him.

Nothing happened.

"Oh, that's right," Thomas said, noticing the startled look on Drake's face. "You've never seen a primitive body before."

The vehicle with the primitive bodies slowed, then came to a stop. Thomas greeted them and boarded the vehicle.

What? But these humans, if that's what they were, and not ghosts, looked like they were on the brink of starvation. How could people survive this way? How could this be real?

Reluctantly, with growing unease, Drake followed.

Presently they were zooming down the tunnel at full speed, going back the way the vehicle had come. The cold air whipped at their faces, their hair fluttered about, and their clothes clung to their bodies. And Drake simply stood there, silent. A corpse. A cadaver. A dead man. Not knowing if any of this was real.

Looking at the ghosts, and then away from them at the speeding tunnel all around them, suddenly he was gripped with regular vertigo as well. Everything was wrong. He wasn't in his comfortable, normal world anymore. Suddenly everything was spinning all around him.

He puked.

His uncle spoke to the ghosts. "Sorry. Veevee." He turned to Drake. "Sorry, Drake. I should have warned you. But we were in such a hurry."

One of the ghosts answered, "Yeah, that happens a lot the first time people see us. People in the Corporate Zone aren't used to seeing people like us."

Thomas went on, "Drake, these men are Foresters."

Drake just stood there, leaning against the rail he had just puked over. Foresters? What the hell? What did that even mean?

Thomas addressed the ghosts. "And this is my nephew, Drake."

So these ghosts…they were…real people? Real primitives. Or Foresters, Thomas called them…

One of the Foresters looked at Drake and spoke. "I'm Applegate." Then he jerked a thumb towards the others. "And this here's Stuart, Alphie, Weston, and Charlie." Each one of them nodded in Drake's direction. "Welcome to the Crypto Railroad."

"Thanks," he feebly replied.

Thomas continued carrying on a conversation with them, while the Foresters ignored Drake. Drake chanced cautious glances at them. He had never seen a skinny human being, except in the sims where people wore their primitive avatars. But primitive bodies in real life? Was that even possible? He knew that their ancestors had looked like these guys a century ago, but not anymore. But here he was, looking at them, in the flesh. They looked unbelievably starved to Drake's corporate-

saved eyes. How could they even live this way? Did they ever eat anything that could be called food? Like Drake's personal favorite, Hostage Dinkies. Hmmm…Dinkies. Thinking about them right now made him wish he was back home with his pantry full of sweets, and not in this dratted tunnel. Moist yellow cakes with rich, creamy white filling inside that were shaped like Homo Sapiens' Corporatus's shrunken phallus, hiding under all that fat. Hence the name "Dinkies." Or what about Twing Twongs? Did these people not understand that one of the basic pleasures of life is eating?

Just then, Drake noticed that two of the men carried what appeared to be really old fashioned rifles—like the kind with bullets—slung over their backs. Shit! Perhaps these men would take them to some strange place, shoot them, and eat them. They sure looked hungry enough.

Such strange bodies. While they had almost no body fat, they had plenty of muscle tissue. In fact, they looked to him to be in much better shape than even an average primitive man, judging by the media he had seen from about a century ago. Their bodies looked the way perhaps an Olympic gymnast's body had looked, from back when they still held Olympic games in reality, before they had migrated all Olympic competitions and all other sports tournaments to the sims, encouraging people to train and get better in virtuality, and not in real life. Everyone had learned in Govly Academy that exercise is much safer in the sims and therefore should never be attempted in reality, with one's own body. You can't get any of those pesky injuries while competing in the sims. Thus, nobody in the Corporate Era did any sort of exercise in real life, but just sat around eating Dinkies and Twing Twongs while playing virtual sports. Physical exercise was for primitive man. It was ancient history, like the pyramids of Egypt, or the Colosseum of Rome.

Their garments were simple—they wore coarse, old-fashioned clothing that looked homemade, something like a mix between twentieth century rodeo clothing and pioneer clothes. A few of them had simple backpacks. The most impressive thing about the clothing to Drake was that it actually fit them. The only place where one was able to buy clothes in the Corporate Zone was from the corporation Big & Huge, which, as the body of homo sapiens had grown, had

grown as a corporation as well, until the chain had naturally become the sole clothing monopoly.

Then a thought suddenly struck him.

If there are men in real life like this, does that mean there are women, too? Just imagine seeing a woman under two hundred pounds in real life! That would be like something out of a fairy tale! Maybe this whole shift in reality wasn't such a bad thing after all. He started to feel slightly better. But then he realized that if such women existed in real life, they certainly wouldn't be interested in him! His mood turned sour once again.

Thomas turned to look at Drake. "They don't have to be risking their lives like this. We should be grateful they came to help us." And then to the Foresters, "Drake was in a great deal of trouble."

"Oh? Trouble with the Corporate Saviors, eh?" Applegate said.

"Something like that. Where did you guys get the clothes, the Small & Short outlet?" Drake thought he'd make a little light humor, but immediately regretted it. Small & Short was actually a subdivision of Big & Huge which sold clothes for people who were four feet tall and two hundred pounds. These guys were as tall as Drake, some of them taller. Damn it! I just had to go and put my foot in my mouth! They're gonna eat us for sure now!

"We made 'em," Weston said. He didn't seem to have taken offense. Neither did the others.

But Weston's comment confused Drake. "So…you have your own autofactories? Not the ones the Corporate Saviors own?"

"Of course we don't have those damned Corporate autofacs. But there's all sorts of salvageable machinery from abandoned factories and homes in the Unsaved Zone. Like sewing machines."

What? The sewing machine? Wasn't that some kind of ancient device that cavemen used, along with the club and the spear? The fact that it was possible to make anything at all without the holy Corporations came as a shocking revelation to Drake, who, although he hated the Corporate Saviors, had paradoxically grown up completely dependent on them. The thought had never crossed his mind that you could make your

own stuff. Life without complete and total dependence on the system he had grown up under all his life…was it even possible?

Suddenly, it began to dawn on him where his uncle was leading him. To a place far worse than hanging on the edge of reality, on the edge of sanity, on the edge of rationality…

To a place with no Dinkies and Twing Twongs.

A place with no TarC, no holy Manna from on high.

Oh, fuck. No more Dinkies.

He had learned about the Unsaved Zone in Govly Academy, like all the other good little vatlings. That treacherous expanse of land between Corporate Zones where no human could survive. His Govly Makers had taught him about the dangerous animals lying in wait to prey on humans. About the lack of autofacs, the lack of corporate food, the lack of Mountain Spew. The lack of anything humans needed to survive. Certain death.

Oh my fucking…You have to be shittin' me…

Drake had assumed when the Gatherer said "freedom," he had meant another Corporate Zone, far away, new fake identities, somewhere where it would be easy to blend in. He never imagined anyone would be crazy enough to take them to…

"You got a girlfriend, Drake?" Alphie piped up, breaking Drake out of his reverie.

Girlfriend? Drake immediately thought about Kristal. Well, she hadn't been his girlfriend. Yet. But if they hadn't…

God damn those fucking bastards! They had lobotomised her! Fucking mentists! Got to keep up their quotas. Fucking murderers is what they are! But he reminded himself, with a cold, growing bitterness in his heart, that until very recently he had been part of that system. He hadn't lobotomized anyone, because it was usually the mentists' responsibility to do that, but he had definitely done his part to keep people enslaved to their system, shaping their reality to the one the Corporate Saviors approved. My entire fucking life. A lie. And the one chance at happiness. Now she's dead. Or a vegetable.

"Well, there was a woman that I really liked, but…they lobotomized her."

It hit Drake at that moment how he really had nothing to

live for now. So my uncle appeared out of nowhere…so what? Gone for twenty years, just to bring me to this cave, traveling to my doom with a bunch of primitives? His life no longer seemed real, and if it was real, it didn't seem worth living.

He might as well have used that Soul Wiper on me. That would have been the most charitable thing to do under the circumstances. Now, I have no future. I'm barely hanging onto reality. And I'm not even sure I want to hang on to it at all…

The only two things that had given his life meaning were now history. He had failed in his lifelong goal, to take at least one of the Corporate Saviors down with him. And he had had sex only one time in his life. Well, it was only virtual sex, but it had felt real enough to him, and he had had every emotion he could ever imagine having for a woman, in that short time they had been together in his Forest of Memories. But now, the one person that had opened up that possibility to him had been taken from him. Failing to achieve his one goal in life, losing the only thing that kept him going from day to day—using his artistic talents to create memories for patients—and now, losing the one chance he had had in his life at primitive, wild, passionate love.

Plus, no more Dinkies and Twing Twongs.

This didn't look like victory.

This looked like complete and utter defeat.

"Lobotomized?" Thomas said. "Oh, I guess you wouldn't know about that."

"Know about what?" Drake asked.

"Project Lobotomy. The mentists select the option to 'lobotomize,' and they think that's what the mental scaler does to the patient. That's because Project Lobotomy is top secret, and the mentists—or the fixers for that matter—don't have high enough security clearance. But what it really does is just put them in a light coma. Then, a government truck comes along, and they are put into a pod full of B.S., and they—"

"Wait, wait, wait…a pod full of B.S.?"

"Breathable Sap. A gel-like solution that feeds them sort of like an IV feeds a patient, and keeps them alive while they are taken to a secret installation where they are turned into the government's secret test subjects. Once they are awoken from the coma, their minds are just fine. Until they begin the testing,

that is."

Drake just sat there looking at his uncle in awe as he spoke, his eyes getting wider and wider. How did he have so much classified information? What exactly was his uncle, anyways?

Wait a minute…so that means…If Thomas was correct, then Kristal must be alive and well, her brain fully functioning!

Drake felt as if his heart skipped a beat. He suddenly found it hard to breathe. The thought of seeing Kristal again made his head spin, but this time in a good way. There might be a chance! There might be a chance that he hadn't lost everything…But if what his uncle said was true, how would she get out of that top secret installation? It seemed next to impossible. But Drake's life had no other meaning, so it didn't matter. He decided he had to get her out. Or die in the process. Which wouldn't be that much worse than following these crazy people to wherever they were taking him to perish.

"You mean…she's alive? And well? Her brain hasn't been destroyed?"

"Most probably. But, like I said, she'll be turned into a test sub—"

"We have to rescue her!" Drake almost shouted.

At this, the Foresters looked at him like he was out of his mind.

"Rescue her? Are you crazy?" one of them, the one that was called Stuart, said. "That's suicide! I'm sorry to break it to you, but if she's in that government facility, there's no way she's getting out."

"Look," Thomas said, "I know you want to help, but—"

"Where is this government installation?"

Alphie piped up. "It's actually not far from where we are going. We have to pass by there on the way. You're free to go there and save her yourself, Rambo." The other Foresters sniggered.

"So you guys know about this place, too?" How come he was the secret government ninja, but he was the only person around here who seemed not to know anything?

"We know about it because the guards stationed at that camp patrol the area we have to go through," Charlie pointed out. "They've been picking up fugitives and putting them there

too. We've got to be really careful once we are on foot not to be seen by them. They musta realized people were fleeing out in that area and built the base there for convenience. They can just swoop by and pick up fugitives, and throw 'em right in there! Easy way to get more test subjects! Along with 'lobotomizing' people. But if you want to live, you'll stay real close to me and the boys—we're really good at being stealthy-like and avoiding the patrols."

"But don't you think it's important to find out what they are doing there? I mean, it could affect all of us. And we could rescue your buddies they picked up," Drake reasoned.

"That's true, but no one here is eager to be one of their next test subjects," Weston said.

"But, come on! You guys look like heroes from primitive action flicks! You're telling me you're all such pussies you're not willing to take a little risk?"

Fuck. He had just called these guys pussies. Maybe they would beat the shit out of him. Maybe they would throw him off the side of this vehicle. But so be it. He had nothing to lose. All he wanted was to see Kristal one last time. To meet with her just one more time in MindWorld as they had done, would be a dream come true, especially after this nightmare…

"Well, there are always risks in life," Applegate said. "But there are some risks we can avoid, and others we can't. We could go and try to save our friends, but the likely result of that would be that the Saviors would have even more prisoners, not less."

"But what about the risk of not finding out what they are doing there until it's too late? Maybe we'll all end up in there if we don't take action first! What about taking the initiative? What about getting the drop on the enemy?" Now he felt like he was getting somewhere. Now he felt like he finally had a chance to fight back, in some way, against the Corporate Saviors. He was fleeing the Corporate Zone, but this was his chance to get back at them, somehow.

Thomas glanced at Applegate with a knowing look. "Maybe I should tell him about—"

But Applegate interrupted. "This guy's determined. I don't think telling him all the risks will deter him."

Tell me about what? Yet another thing my uncle didn't fill

me in on?

Applegate looked Drake in the eye. “Look, if you’re dead set on going there, I’ll point you in the right direction. My best friend’s in that prison. If I could, I’d tear that whole thing down piece by piece. But there are still more people that need to be freed from the Corporate Zone. You aren’t the only one trying to get away from the Saviors. And those people need our help. So we’re going to keep rescuing them the smart way. The way that won’t get us all thrown into that prison.”

Drake knew that his life and Kristal’s depended on this. His entire future, if he had one, depended on this one shot. He needed to think. How could he convince them to help? But it seemed almost impossible. They were set in their ways. He needed to reach some sort of compromise for the time being.

“Okay, you said you could point me in the right direction. Would you be willing to at least go with me far enough so that we could try to get a look at what’s going on there?”

“You mean like a recon mission?”

“Exactly!”

This man had a friend in the camp where Kristal was being held. If I can just play on his heart strings, if I can only get one of them to budge, to start moving closer to helping me.

Applegate just shook his head and looked at the floor of the maintenance vehicle, thinking. Then he addressed his comrades. “You boys willing to join us on a little recon mission?”

“But—” Thomas began meekly.

“Never mind, Thomas,” Applegate said. “Your nephew here has more guts than I’ve seen in a long time. The man has a point. Sometimes, to make things happen, you just gotta throw logic out the window and hang on for dear life. So, what do you boys say?”

The Foresters looked at each other, eying each other’s response. They looked back at Applegate, and one of them said, “We’re in.”

Good. Perfect. Once step closer towards rescuing Kristal.

Maybe, Drake thought to himself, as the maintenance vehicle zoomed on towards the end of the tunnel, maybe you don’t need to have guts. Maybe you just need to be a dead man with nothing else to live for.

Blayze walked along in the night towards the mountain peak Kristal had pointed out for him. Shit, this lady is going to get me killed, he thought.

Apparently that truck had been taking him to that camp. He would have ended up like her, inside the fence. Would they have turned him into one of those remote-controlled humans?

It was like his life had suddenly turned into a primitive science fiction movie. Wait, but didn't the existence of that camp prove that at least some Conspiracy Theories were true? That's what that Silverberg woman had said. But he didn't care. He just wanted to be back at home in his warm bed. It was like this was all a bad dream, and he wanted it to go away.

As he stumbled along in the darkness, he realized something. How in the world was he going to find the fugitives? It was a crazy, hairbrained plan. But this whole situation was hairbrained. He was sure he would soon end up dead, eaten by some wild animals. It was either that or become a remote-controlled human. Some choice.

Suddenly, Blayze lost control over his body. He was being pulled somewhere from behind. He struggled for air. What was happening? He hadn't seen anyone around him. Presently, it was getting darker. He would have screamed for help, if it wasn't for the hand tightly clamped over his mouth. And who would have come to help him, anyways?

He was falling, falling, slowly backwards.

He was on the ground looking up at four shadowy figures. He had been pulled behind some trees, out of the part of the clearing that was visible under the moonlight. The hand was still clenched tightly over his mouth.

"You call out for help and you're a dead man," came a raspy, low voice from behind. "Signal that you agree."

Blayze eagerly nodded his head the best he could, trying to say something in agreement which only came out as muffled gurglings. Then, the hand slowly came off, and he gasped for air.

"Who are you? What are you doing out here?" The raspy voice demanded. "Talk quietly."

"I'm—I'm—," Blayze started, trying to catch his breath. "I'm Blayze Benjamin and the government put me in a pod and shipped me out here, but the truck I was in crashed and I was

the only one that survived. I swear!"

Blayze heard a different voice. "See? I told you. Another accident. They need to give those drivers a crash course in…not crashing!"

And a third voice. The shadowy figures above him were conversing. "It's probably all those god damn corporate drugs they give 'em. Half the time, people in the Corporate Zone can't even tie their shoes, they're on so many drugs."

"Anyways, what are we gonna do with him? You think we can trust him?" He couldn't see him, but this was the man behind him kneeling down close to him, the one that had choked him.

"You think he's from the government?"

"He looks like just a boy—just a few years out of Govly Academy."

As the shadowy forms bantered back and forth, Blayze guessed they weren't from the Glorious Government. "Um… excuse me, but are you guys fugitives? If you are, I came looking for you. There's a woman who needs your help!"

"A woman? Blayze, was it? If you lie to us, we'll snap your neck like a twig. Who is this woman? Where did you meet her?"

He had never been in a life or death situation before. He realized at times like these, your brain races a million miles per hour. These guys seemed dangerous. Also, there was something strange about these shadows. They didn't seem big enough, ***plump*** enough to be human beings. But one thing seemed clear. They didn't seem to like the government. He racked his brain for what to say to get on their good side, but all the options got all confused and twisted and tangled up in his head. Suddenly he blurted out, "I have important information that can lead to the fall of the government and the Corporate Saviors!"

"What the fuck did you just say, boy?" one of the men said.

Oh Christ. Had he misspoken? But that's basically what she had said. A bunch of real life conspiracies that proved the Corporate Saviors were up to no good. Shit. He had gone and done it now. This was sure to get him in even worse trouble with the Glorious Government. But he could just say he said all that under duress. He was being coerced by a bunch of

ruffians.

"Um…Kristal Silverberg, the famous Reality Mediator, is in that government camp nearby here, and she stole Corporate Savior Ron Wolfe's memories and now she knows all about the government's secret plans to sire all children and to enslave mankind."

Crickets.

Blayze continued, hopefully. "Is—is that of any interest to you guys?"

They had ridden with the Foresters to the end of the tunnel, and taken another hydraulic lift up to a hole which led them out into…a dark wooded area in the middle of nowhere. The Unsaved Zone. The most dangerous place a human could be. Left on their own, without the protection of the Corporate Saviors. And without Dinkies. But it didn't matter. Because nothing mattered now except saving Kristal.

The full moon shone over the tops of the silhouetted evergreens. Drake imagined some wild beast would pop out of the trees at any moment now and rip them to shreds.

Applegate had made it clear that under no circumstances would he or the other Foresters get anywhere near the camp, and that they were only going close enough to get a look at what was going on from a very comfortable distance.

Drake and Thomas had been hiding and waiting behind some trees nearby while the Foresters interrogated some random kid—a fugitive, probably—that had happened to be walking by when suddenly Drake heard those words come out of the kid's mouth. Kristal was still alive and well and at the government facility nearby! The kid had confirmed it!

He immediately came out from his hiding place and joined the Foresters and the young man they were interrogating. "See! Did you guys hear that? She's alive! That's who I was telling you about!"

"Wait, your girlfriend is a famous Reality Mediator?" Weston said.

"Alphie, aren't you holding him a little bit tight?" Drake said. "Can't you see? He's on our side!"

"So this Kristal…what was her name? Silverstein? She's your sweetheart?" Charlie asked. "But why are you dating a mediator? They're the ones who spread those lies, that keep people enslaved to their Corporate Overlords!"

"Yeah, but she's…different. She's not like anyone I've ever met before. I know she's not on their side. We've got to rescue her!"

"Yeah, we've got to rescue her!" The kid said. What was his name…Blayze? He seemed a little wet behind the ears, but full of energy. "She has important information about the Corporate Saviors!"

This Blayze—if what he was saying was true—then this was

excellent news. And he alone seemed to be the only one who seemed like he would join Drake's cause of actually fighting back against the Corporate Saviors instead of running from them. Who was this kid? Had Drake found a kindred spirit? Maybe he wanted to kill the Corporate Saviors, too. Maybe he was even a part of a secret group rebelling against the government! Drake had struck pay dirt.

Alphie had now let Blayze stand up, and the Foresters had formed a huddle, and were half-whispering, half-shouting, arguing about something as they stood there in the darkness under the trees.

Finally, Applegate spoke up. "I'm sorry to tell both of you guys, as much as we all hate the Corporate Saviors and want to help bring about their demise…we ain't no prison break party. We're here to help fugitives from the Corporate Zone, but we're not a commando squad. There are only five of us. Trying to rescue her would be suicide. May I remind you, they've got every square inch of that place covered with watchtowers and high-powered laser rifles! And the guards probably outnumber us at least ten to one!"

Now there was a tense silence, the Foresters wanting to get out of there and back to safety as quickly as possible, and Blayze and Drake wanting to help Kristal.

Drake's mind was racing like a hover train. He had to think up a plan, and he had to think it up quickly. He couldn't let this opportunity pass. He realized that even if it were possible for him to rescue Kristal all by himself, which seemed next to impossible, without the help of these men they'd be stuck out here in the middle of nowhere. Where would they go? So he couldn't afford for the Foresters to leave them there.

"Blayze," Drake said. "How did you contact her?"

"I just walked up to the fence and she was waiting for me. It was amazing. She seems to be very smart, very observant. Sharp eyes. Somehow she noticed me even though the guards didn't."

Drake thought for a moment and then said to Applegate and the others, "Will you guys at least wait for us, and watch my stuff, while Blayze and I go there?" He motioned towards his backpack with a thumb.

"What are you going to do? Plead with the guards?"

“I have a better idea.”

Applegate and Alphie led Drake and Blayze, staying in the shadows, behind the trees. Now, they were close enough to see the camp. Ominous datalight pulsated through the night from the ghastly, nefarious-looking towers with their bizarre array of electronic equipment. Red laser dots combed the area, their wispy red lines cutting through the eerie fog. Moonlight glinted sinisterly off the razor sharp barbed wire atop the huge fence which surrounded the camp.

Applegate whispered to Drake. “We’ll wait here. If you two don’t come back within an hour, I’ll assume you’re both dead, and my friends and I will lead your uncle to safety.”

Drake nodded to Applegate, and then turned and took a step towards the camp.

Suddenly, Applegate grabbed Drake by the shoulder, somewhat forcefully. “Wait. One more thing,” he said, looking him straight in the eye to emphasize the importance of what he was about to say. “Look, everything that happens in your life is your fault. Whatever happened in the past doesn’t matter. The future doesn’t matter. All that matters is what you can do right now, in this moment. Got that? I want you to remember that.”

Drake looked somewhat taken aback, as if perplexed, but nodded anyways. Then he and Blayze set out towards the camp. Drake suddenly became invisible, and it looked like it was Blayze walking alone. Fuck, Applegate thought to himself. Drake hadn’t understood him.

“Those guys are so ridiculously brave,” Alphie said, watching Blayze get smaller in the distance.

“Nah,” replied Applegate. “They just have no idea what the hell they’re doing.”

MEDIATOR'S MEMORIES: CORPORATE FOOD CITY

My name is Kristal Silverberg. In my mind, I hold the memories of many people. Here is one of them...

Amazing!

An entire town made of healthy food!

These were Jiff's thoughts as he parkoured over architecture made from graham crackers, frosting, cupcakes, sugar cookies, and Fit Fat wafer bars. There were even gigantic Greasinator buildings, the black, healthy ooze dripping out of their windows. Tree-sized Grimy Greasy Fries stuck out from the ground. He felt lighter than air, as he practically floated along from building to building. He touched down briefly, one foot stepping on a giant lollipop street sign. Without losing stride he leaped, grabbed hold of a candy cane traffic light bar in between the gumdrops traffic lights and spun around it like a gymnast. Then he launched himself and landed in a magnificent fountain of Tar Colored Liquid Sugar. He immediately began imbibing it. He saw a huge McSwirlie Vanilla and Raspberry Cone nearby, so he hopped out of the fountain and started licking the cone.

Looking down, he noticed that though he was wearing his black guard uniform as usual, his body was primitive. He flexed his muscles, admiring the rippling bulges under his uniform. Hmm, seems no matter how much I eat, I stay ripped, he mused. What a dream come true! A city of corporate food! Just then, he noticed a circular bed made out of Papa Porcelain's Pizza. He walked over, lay down, and started picking at the pepperonis and sausages and shoving them into his mouth.

Suddenly, out of the corner of his eye, he saw what seemed to be a primitive woman standing near one of the lollipop signs. And get this...she was naked! And those things that primitive women have—what do they call them? Titties? She had 'em! Wow, that's the most incredible thing I've ever seen, he thought. As he stared at her perky nipples and perfectly shaped breasts, the sausage he had been chewing on fell out of his slack mouth. Then...and this is even more crazy...the naked woman licked the lollipop slowly, suggestively, as she

looked enticingly into his eyes.

Then she took off running.

Golly! I can't believe my luck! First, all this delicious, non-fattening food, and now this!

He bolted after her. After parkouring over a giant Hostage cupcake and then carton upon carton of life-size Jen and Berry's Oh Bee City Honey-flavored Fat Ass Cream (pronounced like a Southerner saying "ice cream," mind you), suddenly Jiff ran smack dab into a three-foot tall yellow dildo-shaped thing with a cowboy hat, scarf, and boots. He picked himself up. Dinkie the Kid! What is he doing here? He looked past Dinkie and saw the naked lady running towards a forest. Soon, she disappeared into the trees.

"Hold up, pahdnah!" Dinkie said, holding out a hand, motioning Jiff to stop. "You know my motto, two hundred before twelve! That means kids gotta stuff their faces until they weigh at least two hundred pounds before their twelfth birthday! Looks like you forgot that rule, pilgrim!"

"But, I wanna—" Jiff started, looking at the trees in the distance longingly.

"No butts! And no ass for you! Not until that there belly hangs down past your chicken nuggies. Now get on back there in Oh Bee City and keep eatin'! Y'all can't be going to that there forest in the condition you're in! You'll starve! Now I got a scale right here..." He produced a scale. "And until you weigh three fittie, you ain't gonna nail that tail!"

"But I don't wanna go back to Oh Bee City and eat. I wanna go to that forest," Jiff protested. "And why didn't you stop ***her***? She doesn't weigh no three-fitty!"

"But dontcha wanna eat all those mouth-watering goodies over in yonder town? Now git back over there and—"

Suddenly, for the first time in his life, Jiff put his guard training into action. He punched Dinkie right in the glans. Then he locked the fingers of both of his hands behind the stunned-looking glans and smashed it down hard on his knee. Finally, he gave him a hard kick, right in the ball sack.

Dinkie started a-hoppin' and a-hootin' and a-hollerin'. "Owwww! Now why'd you hafta go and do something like—"

Suddenly, Jiff sweeped Dinkie's cowboy boots with his leg. Dinkie landed with a thud on the ground.

Now Dinkie was lying on the ground, and a-howlin' somethin' fierce. "Whoa there, pahdnah! You done beat the shit outta ol' Dinkie. Now be a good youngin,' and help a fella back up."

But Jiff had already made a break for the forest. As he got deeper and deeper into the woods, searching for the naked woman, he passed by familiar-looking scenes. He noticed himself as a child, the first time he wet his bed, his graduation from Govly Academy, his guard training, his being stationed here at the Mount Rainier Facility, and he and his fellow guards on night duty eating Papa Porcelain's a few hours ago. Finally, he made it to a small clearing, where the naked lady lay tantalizingly on the ground, one dainty hand covering her crotch, the other making a handbra.

He stopped right in front of her. Looking down, he beheld those creamy white thighs, that skinny waist, those voluptuous breasts.

She looked up at him, her effulgent blue eyes full of mischief. "Oh, hi there, cutie. Looove the uniform."

He looked down at his black uniform, the patch with the nine brains, connected by lightning bolts. "Well, thanks. I just started working here six months ago. Ma'am, if you don't mind, I wanna see watcha got under that arm there."

"Oh really? You want to see…this?"

She let a nipple pop out.

Mmmm…that felt good. A nice tingly sensation right down there in the old chicken tenders.

"Yes. Yes, I do. I like that' ma'am. And if you don't mind, I'd like to see the other one, too."

She let the other nipple pop out.

Mmm….so good. Pink, succulent, and downright delicious-looking. Even more delicious than the city made of food. Now he felt even more stirrin' down in the nether regions. A feelin' like somethin' a-risin' up in the loins.

"Do you like what you see?"

"Yes, ma'am. Iffin' I may say, I certainly do like all that naked stuff you got there. Never seen nothin' like it before. It gets me to feelin' real funny-like." The tingly sensation was growing, feeling warm and good down there, and he could feel his penis starting to rise up under his guard pants.

The woman eyed the rising bulge in his pants. “Ooooh… I wanna see what you’ve got, too. Why don’t we make ourselves comfortable?” the woman said. She snapped her fingers and suddenly a large fancy bed appeared, replete with pink satin sheets, matching overstuffed pillows, and a big, ornate, white headboard. She stood up and sauntered over to the bed. She got in the bed and started rolling around, caressing her smooth hips. “Ooh, you like this?”

“Yes, I like that, ma’am.” He was frozen in place, his boner now fully erect. How embarrassing, he thought. She must notice there’s somethin’ a-wrong with my pants.

“Well then, why don’t you come join me, big boy?”

“Well, don’t mind iffin’ I do ma’am. Hope y’all don’t mind this weird stiff thing I got down in my pants.” Jiff was a bit shy. He had never seen a naked lady before, much less lain down in bed with one.

He lay down on the bed. She immediately grabbed the handcuffs that were hanging from his belt, then used them to handcuff him to the headboard.

Whoa! What is she doing? Using my own handcuffs on me?

“But why do you need to–” Jiff began.

“Shut up!” Suddenly a black whip appeared in her hand and she whipped his face with it.

“Ow!” What in sam hill was goin’ on here? It seemed the roles had been reversed. Wasn’t he the one who was hired to be the tough guy, to keep the situation under control?

She made a fist and dropped it hard onto his balls.

“Owwwwww!” he howled. “God damn it, ma’am!”

The naked lady smiled. My god. She is absolutely ravishing, he thought. Auburn hair, crystalline blue eyes, slender figure with all the right curves…

Jiff stammered. “Wh– what I wanted to say is…th– that don’t– that don’t feel too bad, miss. You can do that again iffin you like.”

She smiled, and then dropped a fist onto his balls again. He let out a loud roar, full of pain.

After he had calmed down, he said, “Thank you ma’am. I appreciate you smashing my balls like that. Do that all you want.”

“Are you sure? Maybe we hurt it. Should we check?”

"Why, sure, ma'am! You can ch–"

"Shut up! No more talking!" She whipped him smack in the face again, this time hurting his eyes.

Jiff obliged and kept silent. He watched as she unzipped him and reached a dainty hand into his pants. She felt his dick inside his boxers. It was large. Hard. She pulled it out, pushing his pants and boxers down out of the way so she could enjoy a nice view. Her eyes widened with gleeful shock. She put her other hand over her mouth. "Oh, my!"

With his member free, it was plain to see it was much bigger than her hand. She started inspecting his balls.

"Ooooh, let's take a look here." She looked intently at his testicles, handling each one. "Oooh…I like them." She grabbed his boner. "And this one…it's so hard!" She began stroking it with her soft fingers. Oh…that felt so…good. Wait, why was her mouth crawling up the side of her face?

She sat there playing with his balls and shaft giggling the whole time out of the mouth crawling around her face. Finally, the mouth went back to its normal position. She looked him straight in the eye, leaned down towards his penis. She put the tip of her tongue on his penis. Ahh, that feels so… Then she started moving her tongue around slowly, caressing the end of his rock hard erection. God, it's so…amazing… She pulled back, and flashed a mischievous smile at him.

"That feels good, lady. Real good. You can keep doing that."

She kept licking all about his glans. Then, looking him in the eye, she ever so slowly, ever so surely lowered herself down on his manly shaft, it going farther and farther up her mouth…

Ohhh…..ohhhh…that feels…soooo…

As she maintained eye contact the whole time, her eyeballs slowly rotated around, all the way…all the way…360 degrees… inside her head…until they were staring forward again, looking at him.

Wait…is that…normal? But, it felt…so…so….gooood….

Suddenly, she pulled his penis off, detaching it from his body, along with his balls. She turned it over in her hand, eying her new dick toy.

Whoa! Wait! Is that…that's not…why– how?

"Wait! You're not supposed–"

She held his dick like it was a nightstick and smacked him in

the face as hard as she could.

Owwww!!! That hurt like a mo…

"You're a naughty, naughty boy, Mr. Guard Man! You need a-punishin'!"

"Thank you for punishing me ma'am…"

But then she was ignoring him, licking all up and down the shaft. She plopped a meaty ball into her mouth and sucked it, and then let it plop out, and then sucked the other ball, let it plop out. She let out a little sigh, as if she was enjoying it. "Mmmmh….what a delicious nutsack you have here, Mr. Guard." Then, she opened up real, real wide and put both balls all the way in and sucked and sucked.

Oooh…that felt good. Wait…why does she have my dick? Isn't it supposed to be–

She started sucking his shaft. Smoothly, rhythmically, she slid the long dick in and out of her mouth, sucking on it sumptuously. "Oh," she said in between sucks, panting. "I like it, it's so strong and hard…" In and out, in and out. Those soft lips, that wet tongue… She was sucking it like she meant it. Ohhh! God! So good… "Mmmm…mmmm…" She said, savoring his manmeat.

She was really getting into it. She began thrusting his cock in even more forcefully, slamming it in her mouth like she wanted it all the way down in that yummy petite belly. "Mmmrrnh! Hnnh!" She made gurgling noises. She was fucking her own face, and fucking it violently. Thrusting, thrusting. Ramming it all in. "Unhgh!! Hnngrl!" She was making choking noises now. Finally, she shoved the whole gigantic disembodied penis all the way down her throat, only part of the balls sticking out of her greedy mouth. Her face was red. She couldn't breathe. It looked like she would pass out.

Had his big long dick gotten stuck in her delicate throat?

But then she grabbed one large ball in each dainty little hand and pulled with all her might. It started coming out slowly, belaboredly. The lenthy veincane finally came free from her mouth, connected by a strand of saliva. Once more she sighed, heaved her chest, and fell backwards into bed, a look of sheer ecstasy on her big eyes. Her mouth was all wet and juicy, a volcano of saliva. Strands of slobber hung down from her lips all over her face. She wiped the spit with the back of

her hand.

"Oohh, I like it," she finally said, looking at his dick, still in her hand. "Your dick makes me soooooo wet down there." She took his dick and played with the tip against her naked pussy, which had become like a water faucet, and said, "Oh, stop teasing me like that or I'll whip you!"

Huh? But he wasn't…

Then she started inserting the dick into her pussy. She moaned.

Wow! He thought. Oh god…that feels so…

He had never felt anything this amazing in his life.

But wait! Something felt wrong. "Um, ma'am, isn't that supposed to be on me when you do that—"

"Shut up! I'll give you your dick back when I feel like it," she erupted. Her nose rotated around on her face, until it was upside down. It kept going around until it was back in its normal position. Huh? Why was her nose creeping around like it was a hand on a clock?

"Okay," Jiff said meekly.

"Oh god, that feels soooo yummy, so absolutely yummy," she purred. "God…I love your dick inside me." She began thrusting the penis into herself more rapidly now. She started moaning loudly. The moaning got faster and faster as she sped up the motion, fucking herself with his dick.

Oh…that feels real good, he thought. Oh god…such a really really good feeling in the dick.

She kept pumping, and he kept feeling.

Pump, feel, pump, feel.

Oh god….sooooo….good…

He almost couldn't stand it. Something was rising up in him, something overwhelming, something unbelievable.

She was slamming it hard now, hard and all the way in. It was as fast as a freight train now.

Suddenly…

Suddenly…

Ohhhh……gawwwwwdddd….fuck…..shit….

He couldn't stand it. Jiff felt this crazy wave come over him and ride him, his body jerking all over the place.

Finally, he was laying there, and out of the corner of his eye, he could see her pull his dick out of her pussy. All sorts of white

cream was flowing out of her pussy now. A string of it was connected to the tip of his dick. When he had felt that feeling, something had flowed out like an eruption. An eruption that was too big for her slender body and tight little vagina and womb.

Then she held his mancannon in front of her face and started jacking it with her hand.

Oh…god…it's so sensitive right now. So…god…so….fuck!!

White stuff spurted out all over her beautiful eyes and nose and mouth.

He was surfing and another wave had just rolled in, bigger than the last. The wave kept going, and going, and going.

The white stuff kept exploding and exploding.

Now her face was completely covered in white, creamy liquid. She couldn't open her eyes. Was she going to get mad? But I feel so relaxed…so good…can't move….can't do anything…

Finally, from under the mountain of cream on her face, a tongue appeared. It started licking her face free from the white stuff covering it. "Mmmm… so delicious," she moaned. Then she started using her fingers to clean her face and shove the white stuff in her mouth. "Mmmmm…my god, so amazing." She kept lapping it up, as if she were licking delicious cake batter clean.

"Ma'am, that felt so g—"

"Shut your piehole!" She forcefully threw his dick at him. Still hard as granite, it collided with his face with a thud. Ouch! It bounced off and landed on the bed beside him.

She got to her knees and moved back over to him. "Mm… let's take a look at your chest, big boy." She started unbuttoning his shirt. She pulled the shirt open, then took it off. "Ooh, such a nice chest." She began feeling his pects. "Mmmm…" Then his biceps. "Oh my! What strong arms! I'm impressed. What a man you are! How about we put your dick back on and have some hot, ravenous sex?"

He felt like all the lifeforce had drained out of him, but what choice did he have?

"Yes, ma'am."

She peeled his boots and socks off, then pulled his pants and boxers all the way off. She plopped his dick back onto his body, still as erect as ever. His balls each went their separate

ways, and started roaming around his body. One ball was riding up his stomach and then chest, while the other roamed down his leg. What the hell? And her nipples…they were roaming around on her body, too. One was on her stomach, the other on her face. Is that—? That can't be normal. Getting on top of him, she grabbed his dick and guided it into her pussy. She began slowly sliding up and down on his tentpole. She reached out and grabbed one of his balls and slid it back down along his body and back into place, under his dick, where it belonged. She grabbed the other ball and slid it, too, back into position. She was moaning now, and grinding him faster, riding him like a stallion. Juices began flowing out of her vagina like a waterfall. Wow! So much juice! Wait…why are her nipples crawling onto my body now? Huh—?! She was jumping up and down, moaning moaning. His unit was so strong, so erect. He could feel the squishiness of her vag-hole, sliding up and down, swallowing his cock. The inside part of her pussy is so soft, yet it clings to my dick so firmly. Mm…so nice. So tight. The pressure feels good.

Her body was covered with glistening beads of sweat, shimmering in the artificial light like jewels. He could see himself, and her, and the entire universe in each one of those sparkling beads… Her cheeks…so moist…so red, her face so flushed. Wait, how did those get there? Got damn it! Annoyed. Her nipples were now perched on his chest, making it look like he had female nipples. Her head spun around on her shoulders precisely one time like in that primitive film about an exorcist. But only one time, and then she went back to normal…. She jumped and jumped. In and out, in and out. Oh, god, that feels so…sooo…..fucking…so fucking….ahhh….slippery, wet, warm…up and down, up and down…And finally…

A geyser exploded in his balls.

He gushed out into her, feeling the neverending flow of semen rushing out from his balls, up through his long dick, and into her tiny womb. It kept gushing and flowing, rushing up, and up, filling her womb with the sweet, warm fluid, flowing back out all over her legs, all over him. Too much…way too much cum….

Finally, his head dropped back on the pillow. He couldn't move. Wow! That was amazing! That was the best thing I ever experienced in my life!

She lay down next to him and cuddled, looking him in the eye. After he regained the ability to think, he looked at her face, studied her beautiful eyes, her full, pouting lips.

Then, her blue irises started growing, expanding, filling his vision. Pretty soon everything else had disappeared and he was floating in the variegated blue shades of her eye, swirling all around him. Wait…why am I floating in an eye? Never mind… just roll with it…

CHAPTER 18: THE ESCAPE

Kristal, standing over the seated, sleeping guard near the fence, carefully removed the chromatic mental cable from the cervical input on one side of the guard's xtphn, and then a grey dongle from the cervical input on the other side of his xtphn. She pocketed the mental cable, and inserted the grey dongle into her own cervical input. Good thing these guards are lazy blubberboys who like to take a lot of naps on the job, she thought. And good thing she had found this guard, who had chosen a dark place for his nap, out of the view of the spotlights, with no other guards nearby.

She had entered his dream and stolen all his memories. She lightly grabbed the roley-poley guard's man-package, almost hidden under a mountain of belly jelly, and whispered, "Thanks." She was sure the sleeping guard was quite relaxed now. He wouldn't be going anywhere any time soon. She reflected on how she was getting better at controlling things inside people's MindWorld. She was enjoying this.

She began to walk away, leaving the guard where he slept, but suddenly, the guard started mumbling, murmuring. He seemed to be half asleep. "That was you, wasn't it? In my dream."

"Yeah, sweety," she whispered into his ear, leaning down to get close. "But I gotta go somewhere. I'll be back later."

"Okay, be sure to come back and visit me. We gotta do that again sometime," he said, his eyes half-open.

She shushed him like a mother putting a baby to sleep and gently closed his eyes. "Night night."

She left the guard Jiff where he sat sleeping in a reinforced folding nanochair he had snuck from the rec room, and then began slowly shambling along, imitating the robotic gait of the humans who were no longer human. Meatbots, as the guards called them. Human beings, who were now just fleshy end terminals controlled by the AI. The thought of it made her shudder. The ultimate goal of the Net—to connect all things, both the non-living and the living! The Internet of Things, and the Internet of Bodies. Imagine everything in the world, connected to one, central Artificial Intelligence. I'm not going to end up that way! She told herself. I'm not going to be a meatbot!

She had learned quite a bit about the meatbots, thanks to

Jiff's memories. She now knew the reason why they were shuffling about mindlessly in geometric patterns. While a subject was connected to the grid, there were three possible states. First, the central AI which controlled the grid could, if it wanted to, turn over full control to the subjects. Second, the AI could choose to only partially control the subjects, allowing them some freedom.

Or, the third option.

The AI could take complete control of the subject. That's what they were doing now. The reason why was because they were expecting a visit from a Corporate Savior soon, and they were already behind schedule. They had set the meatbots to full AI control, and were running them through various calibration tests, working out any bugs, walking them through different schematics, to make sure everything was working properly, and none of the subjects accidentally "woke up" or retaliated.

Thus, they were prisoners to the AI, prisoners of the mind. Only if the AI wanted them to, could they think and act like normal humans. And the Corporate Saviors, of course, would have control over the AI.

Even though the guards were tired, Wagstaffe had told them they had to work around the clock, or else the Saviors would be very disappointed. Meaning, of course, that heads would roll. Or worse…souls would be thrust down into Hell. That Hell server seemed to be a good investment for the Saviors. It was a great motivator. More motivating, in fact, than capital punishment. There were always some people who wouldn't be motivated, even by death. There are some people who even long for death. But eternal torment, that was a different story. By comparison, death seemed like a reward.

She now knew so much more, thanks to her rescuers and their ingenious plan. So many memories that she could call upon at any moment to help her. Drake's, Wolfe's, and now Jiff's. With Wolfe's memories, she knew much more about Drake. Things even he didn't know. About his uncle. And his father. But she figured some things were better for him to find out about on his own.

She already possessed the memories of so many people. How many people's memories would she eventually store inside her unique mind if she kept going? She very well could

become the most knowledgeable person on earth!

But she knew that would never happen. For, as fun and interesting as stealing memories was, it was no easy task. Her brain already felt taxed carrying around such a heavy load. Storing memories in her brain wasn't free. It was a tradeoff. They bogged her down. Not only because of their content, which included many lifetimes of bad memories along with the good, but because of the amount of cerebral resources it took to store all of them. Eventually, the burden would outweigh the benefits.

Blayze—who it seemed was her guardian angel—had come back, and amazingly he had shown up with Drake Lively! Her Reality Fixer! And Drake had given her a mental cable, which was all she needed. It was so brilliant. Drake, having known her abilities, had come up with the plan for her to get out of here. Not only that, he had actually had the foresight to bring things like mental cables into the wilderness. So far as Kristal was concerned, he was now her knight in shining armor. She would just have to get married to the man for rescuing her. Of course, when Drake formulated the plan, he probably hadn't imagined she was going to have virtual sex with that guard. But he had looked so cute inside his dream, she just couldn't resist.

Now she knew everything Jiff the guard knew. She knew about their training, about their sleeping quarters, about their beloved Papa Porcelain's day. She knew their patrol patterns, so she would be able to help fugitives avoid getting caught. And most importantly, she now knew how to escape this facility.

Each guard had two access dongles, a grey one for their sleeping quarters, rec room, mess hall, etc., and a red one for the three guard exits, located around the perimeter of the camp. There was also a large gate for vehicles, but that was controlled by a switch in the guard booth. It was camp policy to only take the red dongle with them when they went outside the camp to patrol for fugitives, in order to prevent the exits from opening accidentally as they passed by.

She neared the guards' sleeping quarters, carefully looking every which way to make sure nobody noticed her. The door recognized the dongle in her xtphn, and there was a soft click. Open sesame! She pulled the handle, opened the door, and tip-toed into the building.

Inside, the room was dark. There were about twenty sleeping guards, all in mega-reinforced bunk beds. One wall was lined with lockers. She went over to the lockers, and as she approached Jiff's, there was a soft click as it unlocked. She opened the locker and removed a dongle, just like the one she had inserted into her xtphn, only this one was red.

She plugged the second dongle into her other cervical input, and then began quietly tiptoeing back towards the door. Suddenly, she heard a noise. She stopped dead in her tracks. Was one of the guards awake? Had he noticed her? Would she be caught? She held her breath. She looked carefully around, her eyes wide open with fright. Then she realized it was just one of the guards, talking in his sleep, saying something about Papa Porcelain's. She exhaled. She could breathe again. Whew! Thank god! She then continued tiptoeing, going as quietly as she could, and exited the sleeping quarters. Back outside, she began slowly making her way towards the exit nearest where Drake and Blayze were waiting for her. She moved slowly and methodically, pretending to be part of the geometric test patterns that the meatbots were forming.

Suddenly, she heard sirens begin to wail in the background. The data rainbows on all the towers' cables started dancing about wildly, as if giving orders. All at once, every meatbot in the camp stopped where it was. They all stood still for a moment. And then, they all turned at once…towards her! Every meatbot in the camp was now looking at her, a crazed look in their eyes. Then, they started slowly shambling in her direction. As they came, stepping closer and closer, they began shouting lifelessly, soulessly, "You are not connected! You are not connected!"

Oh my god! What had happened? Her plan had been going perfectly. How had they figured her out? This couldn't be happening! She needed to make it back to Blayze and Drake! She noticed some of the guards in the watchtower pointing at her.

She was about to bolt towards the exit. But then she remembered all at once, from Jiff's memories, something she hadn't thought about before. The dongles could be used not only for getting around through the camp, but also to access the guards' Telepathy Chat. Telepathy Chat was a new technology which was based on the much older standard,

TCP/IP. Having been invented many years ago by some crazy British guy intent on merging supernatural phenomena with technological advances, TCP/IP stood for "Telepathy Control Protocol/Intermind Protocol." It allowed users to merge their thoughtstreams into one big "groupstream." Instead of walkie-talkies, the guards simply communicated by group telepathy, listening in on each other's thoughtstreams. There were ways to focus on a particular thoughtstream, attenuate thoughtstreams one didn't want to pay attention to, or temporarily boost the signal of one's own thoughtstream to send out a blast message.

Shit! Why hadn't she thought about that before? Had she flipped on the groupstream right away, she would have realized what they had been talking about—err, thinking about—and would have realized they were on to her. But having access to multiple lifetimes of memories could sometimes be a bit confusing. It was like storing thousands upon thousands of rolodexes in her head. Her mind was still sorting through all those memories, finding useful ones, making new connections, making sense of all the raw data.

But it wasn't too late. Listening to their chatter now could alert her of potential traps as she made her way toward the exit, could give her the upper hand. Moving at lightning speed, she closed her eyes, and focus-clicked the icon that looked like the dongle, and started focus-clicking through various submenus, not having enough time to try and use Jiff's memories to remember where it was. Come on! Come on! Where is it? I need to get out of these menus so I can open my eyes and start running! Finally…there it is…Telepathy Chat! She focus-clicked it.

Instantly, she was connected.

The thoughtstreams of dozens of guards began to flow into her mind.

She opened her eyes.

Hundreds of meatbots were now swarming around her, having broken off from their mathematical test patterns to amble slowly toward her. If she could just make it to the exit… She started running as fast as she could, trying to focus on the guard's thoughtstreams as she went, searching for something, anything to help her on her way…

"The non-connected human is a female, brown or red hair, Caucasian…"

"How is she not connected?"

"It doesn't matter, she won't be around much longer—"

"I spotted her!"

"Me too! Looks like she's stolen some of our dongles."

"Sir, requesting permission to fire…"

"Permission granted."

Suddenly the blast of a high-powered assault laser rifle rang out in the night air. One of the closest meatbots to her suddenly dropped to the ground, his chest ablaze, his face contorted in the agony of death. And then another one. And another one. Thwwwudd!! Thud! Thud! Three dead bodies. Three dead sacks of meat. Fine, the less of them around me, the better. Thanks for helping clear out the way, guards! She decided to move in the direction of the dead meatbots, to avoid the ones that were still alive and could catch her.

But then suddenly, as if by magic…

The dead bodies started to rise.

What?! Still alive after getting hit by that? They started shambling towards her again. And then a cold realization washed over her. Those towers. They're keeping their brains alive. Their consciousness has now left them. They have died. Their ***souls*** have died. But there is still electricity moving through their brain, through their nervous system. And the AI is controlling that electricity. Controlling those nervous systems. Manipulating those bodies.

Soulless humans. Controlled by AI.

She remembered reading that the brain can go on living, even after the body dies, for several hours. So without a heart pumping blood through their veins, they could still be controlled…

She wanted to vomit, as she saw the dead humans, controlled by the mainframe, stumbling towards her. True fleshbots. Not a single drop of humanity left in them.

But she needed to keep moving. She revised her course, so as to avoid the dead meatbots. She kept running as fast as she could, dodging meatbots, keeping as wide a girth from them as possible. I'm going to get out of here, god damn it! I'm not going to become one of those things! Laser fire kept

showering around her like a storm. She could be struck at any moment.

All of the sudden, she recognized Jiff's thoughts on the groupstream. "Wait! Don't shoot! I like her! She's different!"

Jiff began arguing with the other guards, pleading for them not to kill her. The sirens surely had woken him, and he had realized what was happening.

"What? Are you consorting with the test subjects?" Another guard was saying.

She didn't have time to pay attention to them argue. She needed to get out. She was so close. Only another thirty meters to the exit. She could even see Blayze from here, a shadow waiting in the darkness on the other side of the fence. She knew Drake was standing there with Blayze, but Drake now had an xtphn attachment that made him invisible! A neat trick. One she wished she had now! He had even offered to try and pass it through the fence to her, but she told him not to because she remembered from Wolfe's memories that they had installed an electric fence. It had been risky enough passing the mental cable through; she didn't want him to get electrocuted trying to pass that bulky attachment through.

Seeing Blayze, her heart leapt with joy. Almost there! She kept running.

Suddenly, a meatbot lunged at her and latched onto her leg. She almost fell over. She had been forced to an almost complete halt. She tried to break free, but to no avail. God, this meatbot was strong! The thing's grip was as iron. Did those towers enhance their strength, or was this thing just really tenacious? Suddenly she had a flash of understanding. Those towers have full access to their intphns, which are capable of "injecting" virtual drugs into the brain. Right now this meatbot's brain is probably all hopped up on digital adrenalin or something even more powerful. God damn it! I should have taken Jiff's gun! What was I thinking? She had made several tactical mistakes before going through with this plan. She should have taken longer, planned this out more thoroughly. But Drake had insisted they had to get out of there quickly...

Suddenly a laser blast hit the thing latched onto her squarely in the forehead, and it went limp. She was free! But what, who...?

She saw Jiff, laser rifle in hand, standing several yards away. He had protected her.

No time to waste. This thing will "resurrect" momentarily. She began to run again.

A new thoughtstream broke out over the group chat. "What?! Actually defending the test subject?!" She recognized that psychotic-sounding thoughtstream as General Wagstaffe himself. "Jiff, you'll pay for this! Guards, fire on the subject at once!"

"Roger! Roger, roger…" came the thoughtstreams of ten, fifteen, twenty guards at once.

Shit! She was going to die! Terror overtook her, like she had never felt before, gripping her, paralyzing her. She felt weak, light-headed. Suddenly, she lost all control over her body. She stumbled, falling hard onto one knee, the weight of her large frame crushing down on it. Owww! The pain shot up through her leg. As she tried desperately to get back up and keep running, she suddenly lost her balance and crashed into the mud, the full force of her body ramming down into the earth unceremoniously.

She was seeing stars. What was happening? The ground crashing into her heavy, corporate-saved frame like a ton of bricks. The streaks of pain shooting out through her body. She tried to move, but couldn't. Her body was just not built for this type of abuse.

She wasn't an action hero. She didn't have a perfect, athletic body like on cerebralvision. I'm a fake. My entire persona is a sham. I'm just a fatass. God, I wish I had my perfect body now! Then, I'd be able to make it out of here. But now, I'm going to…I'm going to…

She had to get up. She had to run. But her body was filled with pain. She couldn't move.

She silently accepted her fate, and waited for the end to come.

She, Kristal Silverberg, was going to die.

But after a while, laying there, face-down in the mud, she realized something. She realized that somehow, impossibly… she was still alive.

And then she realized something else. She didn't hear the sound of laser shots.

Instead, over the groupstream, she was hearing...what were those sounds? Grunts of pain? Moaning, cursing... What was going on?

"Oh, fuck!! Shit!!! Papa Porcelain's!" cried one guard.

"It hit! Oh god, I need a restroom! Sorry, Boss!" another guard screamed.

"Crap! I'm gonna shit my pants!" yelled another.

As all the guards on the groupstream groaned in mutual pain, it hit her.

She remembered, from Jiff's memory...

Today had been...

Papa Porcelain's day.

A few hours ago, they had flown in dozens and dozens of boxes with Papa Porcelain's Pizza to the guards on night duty. And each pizza came with Papa Porcelain's famous Grease Sauce. And now, their insides were dealing with the consequences of heaps upon heaps of ooey gooey cheese, loads of that chemical-filled artificially concocted sauce that looked like it was made for lubricating an engine, and an assortment of other artificial chemicals, all baked into one delicious pizza. All the guards on duty had dropped their weapons and made a break for the camp toilets in unison.

She was saved!

"Thank you Papa Porcelain!" she breathed, as the sounds of farting and gastrointestinal pain from toilet stalls around the camp began to rise to the heavens like a celestial chorus.

Now, her strength returning, she got back up on her feet and started towards the exit. And now she saw why the meatbots hadn't gotten her. There were still hundreds of them, slowly swarming, slowly closing in, a look of inhuman frenzy gleaming in their eyes. But Jiff was still firing on them with his laser rifle, picking off meatbots one at a time, as they approached her. She forced herself to keep moving. Presently, she was at the exit. She turned around, and took one last look at Jiff. He saluted her.

And she ran out into the night.

The sun began to rise as the small group trudged forward along a dirt path, throwing its glorious golden light on the treetops. The clear, placid surface of a small lake sparkled in front of them as it caught the first morning rays. Suddenly, a large brook trout burst forth from the water, its bright orange belly glowing like fire as its green scales and yellow fins caught the morning sunrays and reflected them into a hundred tiny explosions of crystal light. Above the lake, two nearby small peaks stood majestically, their grassy surface alternately covered by clumps of dark green firs and grey rocky patches.

The crisp morning air and the fragrance of the evergreens bathed the exhausted Blayze in sensations of calm and euphoria as he stared in awe at the majestic scene. Before coming to the Unsaved Zone, he had never seen a sunrise before, because he had never seen the sun. Or a blue sky, or a lake, or a forest. He had seen all these in the sims, of course. But right now, standing here before the real thing, those virtual knockoffs of reality seemed so tawdry, so cheap. So infinitely inferior to the real deal. And the pure, clean air…so refreshing and invigorating. Not that toxic, smoggy air in the Corporate Zone.

Kristal had joined Blayze and Drake outside the fence of the facility, and the three had run as fast as their stocky legs would take them to the nearby woods where the primitives and Drake's uncle had been waiting. And then, they had begun their trek, guided by these primitive-looking men—who called themselves Foresters—talking only in hushed tones and stopping only when necessary for the corporate fugitives to rest their weary bodies. Blayze had been starving, his body aching all over, his head exploding with pain. He had never had so much physical activity in his life.

Luckily, a few of the Foresters had backpacks that were filled with food, which they shared with Blayze and the others. Although it tasted completely different than what he was used to, it seemed to be much more filling than his standard fare.

Blayze sighed as he plodded along. What would they do to him if they found him now? How would he talk his way out of this one? Surely, what he was doing now would be considered aiding and abetting criminals. But what else could he have done? He had rescued a woman in distress. And he had done

the best he could in this total clusterfuck of a situation. At least he wasn't a test subject in that camp. The thought of those mindless citizens sent a shudder down his spine.

He knew if he returned to the Corporate Zone, he'd either be painlessly ended—the merciful option—or sent to Hell. Excruciating agony for the rest of his digital eternal existence.

Kristal had told them of Savior Wolfe's memories, of his plot for world domination. How he despised the other Corporate Saviors and felt himself superior to them in every way. She explained how the Corporate Saviors were always infighting and competing with one another, jockeying for position, making power grabs. Wolfe wanted to create a system, which he was in control of, which would give him power over every individual alive. That system, he hoped, was the Mind Grid. And after he had connected all the corporate citizens to it, he planned on connecting the Corporate Saviors themselves. Every human on earth, nothing more than his slave.

The sound of Drake's voice woke Blayze from his reverie. "Is this it? Is this where your camp is?"

"No, we're not quite there yet," the one who called himself Applegate replied. "But we'll be there soon enough."

Then it hit him. Where were these skinny folk taking them? He hadn't thought about it, what with all the excitement from last night. Where would they go? Wait. It couldn't be. This place was beautiful, but people couldn't live here, right?

He had heard the rumors, yes—the place where people live without technology, without civilization, in the middle of a real forest. But he had believed like everyone else that it was a fairy tale. Not like the everyday reality the corporate citizens live in… the Eyelid Menus they punch, the cerebralvision filling their brains. The enchanted vistas of Simworld surrounding them in a cloak of vectors. The web sites. The Thoughtbook posts. The holograms. The cold glow of pixels. This is reality.

In the corporate world, only the simulation is real.

If one were to dig, one would find there is no underlying reality.

Actual reality…

Unmediated, unmitigated, raw…

It was a new concept for Corporate Man. Alien, foreboding…

Could human beings really exist in raw reality? Or would it sear them into nothingness, like the surface of the sun?

Soon they were at the top of a steep hill, overlooking a valley full of conifers. A herd of deer wound their way along the bottom of the hill and into the wooded area. White, wispy clouds cast their shadows on the forest below. Far away, in the distance, were two mountain peaks.

“See those two peaks in the distance?” another Forester, called Weston, said. “Our destination lies between them.”

With the Corporate Police and Hell waiting for him in the direction whence he came, there was only one direction to go.

Forward.

The old men floated in neverspace, sitting in their glistening chrome orbs, alternating looks of amusement and boredom on their faces as they listened to an orator standing on a glistening golden disc, floating in their midst. All present donned shiny silver togas and glittering golden laurels.

Above and below them glowed an ominous red sky. White, billowy clouds raced past, as if a river of steam were drifting over a sea of blood. All around them in a circular pattern stood massive, white Corinthian pillars.

This was a private gathering of mankind's best and brightest, the defenders of the galaxy, the protectors of all that was good and right, the most brilliant and talented minds in the universe.

The Corporate Saviors.

The orator was Savior Ronald K. Wolfe, founder of WhirlySnake, de facto director of the Department of Thought Management, and CSO of FattyChemCo. He peered out at the dozens of floating orbs, his coiled muscles bulging out of his toga, his sculpted, tanned features exuding an air of superiority. He stretched forth his hand, and bellowed with a loud voice for all to hear.

"The Third Generation of Thought Management Technology will bring about the transfiguration of the Corporations into their final and highest degree of Godhood, Corporatus Divinitatis! The dawning of a new age!"

Savior Maxton Smith stifled a yawn. Wolfe glanced in his direction, and he suddenly forced himself to perk up.

Wolfe continued.

"My fellow Saviors, we are standing at the end of history. Technology has finally put an end to the struggle between Das Kapital and the proletariat. Class warfare, the essential struggle of civilization since time immemorial, is nearing its end. Capital has won. The aristocracy has won. The elites have won. And the peasants have no one to thank but themselves for cheering on their own enslavement. It was they, more than anyone, who helped create their own ultimate demise. First, they accepted the Net and project PRISM, a system of electronic spying on every individual a thousand times more intrusive than the Stasi or the KGB. Then, they cheerfully welcomed the smartphone with its 24/7 audio and video

surveillance of their every action. Masturbating. Taking a shit. Having sex. Every word, every internet search, every purchase, every message. Every dick pic, every cunt shot."

Musky Pits, CSO of Triple-X Enterprises, developer of the censorbots that wiped anything sexual from the Net, suddenly perked up and nodded his head in approval. "Now I'm starting to like this talk." He reached his hand surreptitiously into his toga, looking around to make sure no one was watching.

"Then, they accepted MindLink. They had already invited corporations into their everyday intimate life by carrying their little slave devices around with them everywhere they went. Now, they invited us into their brains. The First Generation of Thought Management Technology! The long awaited fulfillment of Harari's prophecy. We own the thoughts of every individual on the planet! Not a single thought can escape our all-seeing, omniscient eye! Then, with the Second Generation of Thought Management Tech, the mental clinics with their memory erasure hardware, the masses now accepted corporations deciding what is acceptable for them to think! What constitutes badthink or goodthink and which memories needed to be erased…the Reality Cube flawlessly complementing the mental scaler and planting corporate goodthoughts lovingly into our subjects' brains. But, will we stop there? No! Everything that has hitherto come to pass pales in comparison to what the Third Generation of Thought Management Tech will bring about! We find ourselves standing at the end of that long road that began when ARPA launched the prototype Net. The masses shall finally, eagerly, happily embrace the long awaited culmination of information technology, the final completion of the chains that bind them, the absolute end of human agency…Mind Grid!"

Wolfe's eyes scanned the room piercingly. The Saviors just sat there, apathetic, contented looks on their faces. Savior McHartattack was staring at a booger he had just picked. Savior Pits had his hand in his toga again, caressing himself. Even Viktimstein was winking away the boredom.

The imbeciles! Endless sex with hundreds of slaves and siring the next generation of humans is enough for them to feel satisfied with their lives? Why don't they get excited about the complete and total subjugation of the human race?

"Yes, but what kind of marketing spin are we going to put

on it?" a Savior with shrewd eyes and a lengthy neck beard asked. "Are we going to say if you don't want to be a robotic slave to your corporate overlords you're a bigot who is committing genocide against black people, queers, and polygamists? Or should we say there's a climate catastrophe or ultrapandemic and the only way to save humanity is by turning all humans in to robots? Have you thought about these subtle advertising distinctions?" It was Bigscam Young, CSO of Multi-Level Pyramid Schemes, Inc. Young was well known for being a pervert, having a fetish for pioneer women, forcing his female slaves to all wear bonnets and pioneer dresses with cutouts exposing their breasts and asses.

Wolfe sneered. "Oh, that's so early 21st century. Haven't you realized we've dumbed down the lardasses so much over the decades that we don't even need those fake crises any more? They'll do whatever we tell them to. End of story. Now if you'll allow me to continue—"

"Oh, how I miss the glory days of fake crises," Savior Gus Van Valkenburg, head of Corporate Salvation Network said wistfully. "Give me a couple of crisis actors smirking and giggling for the camera while they talk about their dead family members who were killed by the latest fake crisis, and that's all I need to be happy…" No one seemed to be paying attention to him.

"I thought we were rolling Mind Grid out already. Why are we talking about marketing it?" Savior Yorgonsohn, CSO of Pretend Space Explorations put in. Yorgonsohn was bald, skinny, and every few moments his eyebrows twitched uncontrollably.

"Yes, we are very close to rolling it out," Viktimstein put in, covering for Wolfe. "And I can assure all of you, Wolfe and I have already laid out a brilliant marketing strategy."

"Thank you, Savior Viktimstein," Wolfe said. Viktimstein had always been more diplomatic than Wolfe. But Wolfe was so good at getting results the other Saviors begrudgingly tolerated him running the show when it came to Thought Management. "Now, as I was saying—"

"Will people please stop calling this fraud Viktimstein?" Savior Sugarmountain cut in. Skippy Sugarmountain, a red-headed, androidish thing who perpetually looked like he was in his twenties, was the CSO of Thoughtbook. He glared at

Viktimstein, his eyes boring holes into him. “Quit the act, McScottish! You’re not Jewish, and we all know it!” And then to the others, “He’s Chappy McScottish! He’s not Oprest! His ancestors are from the Scottish Lowlands. I studied up on him!”

Harry Bush, CSO of BlackGoldCo, drawled in his southern accent, “I’d like to point out that this Mind Gribber thingamajig or whatever it’s called, makes six flags easier than ever.”

“They’re called ‘false flags,’ not six flags, you old bag of dust and bones,” snapped Pits, who on cerebralvision looked calm and collected, but among his peers was known as an inveterate wisecracker. “You of all people must be getting senile indeed to forget a word like false flag.” The old ex-politician had masterminded of one of the biggest in history.

“Right,” Bush continued. “As I was saying this makes capture the flag easier than ever. No need to create any fake news. Just implant the false memories directly into everyone’s mind, all at once. They will all remember standing there next to the towers watching the planes collide into them, or seeing the anti-government nutjob blow up a government building.”

Bigscam Young rolled his eyes. “Don’t you get it, you decrepit old cowboy? With Mind Grid, we won’t need to implant false memories. We can just take over people’s minds directly.”

Savior Bush exploded with anger, almost tipping over in his floating orb. “Ah, shut up, Bigscam, I know all about you and your religious scam where you send missionaries around the world ostensibly to spread the gospel of the golden laser discs from the Grand Tetons, but really so they can learn different languages and come back to Provo-Lake Corporate Zone where all your MLM corporations are headquartered so they can then use those language skills to spread your MLM scams in every country!”

“They’re golden compact discs, and they were found in Mount Everest, you nitwit!”

“Gentlemen, gentlemen!” Wolfe shouted. “Put aside your differences for long enough for us to agree on how best to subjugate mankind! Golden compact discs, golden laser discs… what does it matter? They could be golden Betamax for all I care! Anyways, as I was saying, Mind Grid is the apex of—”

From out of nowhere, Speedy Deth, CSO of Tarky Tarla, popped into existence among the others. He let out a long guffaw and then said sardonically, "Oh, Savior Wolfe! For once, you grace us with your actual presence here in SimWorld, instead of jacking in while you jack off with your female slaves. Pray tell, what be the special occasion, Herr Wolfe?"

"Probably he just discovered he's gay and wants to announce his wedding to Savior Tard," piped in Pits.

"Oh shut up, Pits," Gay Richard Tard, current CSO of Whirlysnake, said bitingly. "When are any of the famous Musky projects ever going to come to fruition? The colonization of Mars? The Diego-Angeles to Jose-Francisco vacuum tubeway? We even had to find someone else to create the digital cerebral interface, since your father's NeuronConnect was a joke. What was your father doing all that time? Playing with his monkeys?"

"Oh, you go play with your monkey, Gay Tard!" Pits shot back.

Wolfe reached into his toga and produced a large stack of virtual papers. "You know what these are? My notes. I spent hours preparing this speech, and you guys can't pay attention for five seconds!"

Jack McHartattack, the one Savior not wearing a toga, but instead a gaudy magenta and blue clown suit, raised his bright red eyebrows, his clownlike face a ghastly sight to behold. He spoke in an affectedly high-pitched comical tone. "How long is your presentation, Ron? I wanted to show off my new McQuadruple Bypass Burger commercial." He let out a whimsical laugh that sounded like a mental patient on too many drugs.

"Jack," Wolfe replied. "We all know enslaving the minds of the lardasses is more important than clogging their arteries, as important as that is. Now, if all of you will act like adults and please just let me proceed with the—"

Savior Bobby Doors suddenly cleared his throat loudly, "Ahem, I want to call to everyone's attention that my company is no longer are doing business as TinyLimp. In the future, please use our new name, MegaHard in all communications going forward." He looked down and muttered to himself, "Why did I ever chose that name in the first place?"

"We all know why you chose that name, Bobby, and I think we can all agree the old name is much more fitting than the new one," Pits chuckled. Then, addressing Wolfe, "Hey Ron, I just had an idea. Instead of volcanic pagan ritual sacrifice, maybe you could just pass me a few of your naked slaves when they turn twenty? I heard from Viktimstein that some of them are really hot. I prefer blondes and redheads if possible..."

"We can talk about trading slaves afterwards, like we normally do. Now, again, just let me—"

Sugarmountain piped in, "You're not the only one with a new name, Bobby. I want everyone to remember to refer to my company as SnowKrash. We are no longer Thoughtbook."

"Ah, fuck you Skippy," Savior Tard retorted. "Everybody already knows you as Thoughtbook, we're not gonna start calling you something different now."

Wolfe threw his stack of virtual papers into the air in disgust. "Okay, forget it!" The notes slowly faded out of existence as they fell.

Fuck it, Wolfe thought. It was like babysitting a bunch of hyperactive kids who had just eaten six bowls of Chemical Loops. But what could he do? He had to come to these stupid meetings, which always devolved into slave-trading meat markets. His ultimate goal was to institute a coup, take over the whole corporate apparatus, and rule as absolute dictator of the planet. But coups were messy. One step at a time, he told himself. First, enslave humanity by turning them into robots. Then, turn these friggin' ass clowns into my very own automatons, ready to obey my every whim at the press of a button. His soul chortled inwardly. His plan for world domination was perfect.

"I had a lot of other stuff I wanted to say," Wolfe barked, "but, as always, you nincompoops can't stay on topic, so let's just move on with the commercial."

All at once, he mentated six large screens in a circle all around him, facing the floating Corporate Saviors, so they could all see. The red sky suddenly faded from day to night. Milky constellations twinkled in the burgundy twilight.

An oldschool black and white video started playing on all of the screens at once. Shots of happy, sumo-wrestler-sized citizens walking, riding hover mobility scooters, and driving

hovercars in a clean, sterile, retrofuturistic-looking community, huge plastic smiles plastered across their faces. Cheesy, boisterous music played in the background. It looked exactly like those old-timey primitive commercials from a century and a half ago, except just quadruple the size of the citizens.

A "Voice of God" narrator's voice boomed, "Our Glorious Government has made life even easier, more convenient, and enjoyable. With Mind Grid! In Mind Grid Smart Communities, so many of life's daily tasks just go up in a puff of smoke! Mental brushing! Forget about it! Mental Flossing? A thing of the past! And don't worry about having to remember that pesky Mental Checkup at your neighborhood Mental Clinic, because that, too, is a thing of the past!"

The silver light of the commercial flickered on the Corporate Saviors' eyes and silver togas, as they stared on with blank expressions, apathy, or boredom. Viktimstein was about to yawn but caught Wolfe staring at him and pretended to be suddenly interested in the commercial. McHartattack was more shameless, picking disinterestedly at a booger as he rolled his eyes. Tard was busy scratching his crotch.

"Mind Grid Smart Communities are based on the latest advances in EMF technology." The video showed happy-looking towers with gleaming rainbow cables. "No longer is it necessary for citizens to go to a Mental Clinic or sit in a Mental Chair. Everything can be done remotely, while citizens remain seated comfortably on their fat asses in the reinforced nanosofas of their apartments! The Mind Grid towers are run by Mind Grid AI, the most advanced artificial intelligence on the planet. No more need for mentists or mental nurses. Mind Grid does everything!

"Are you worried about the possibility that badthinking people might get angry and rebel against the government? Do you fret day and night, worrying that the richest and most powerful people in the world might fall victim to an angry mob? Then worry no more! Mind Grid is here to solve all our problems! Citizens definitely won't rebel once this system is in place! Citizens will remain happy, healthy, and perpetually in love with their Corporate Saviors and their Glorious Government! Because anything less than loving your overlords is Conspiracy Theory! So download the update, and log into Mind Grid today!" And then, in a super-fast voice, the narrator

blurted out, “Mind Grid may cause seizures, heart attacks, strokes, aneurisms, and lifelong servitude to a small group of wealthy people who rule the planet using advanced technology.”

The screens disappeared, the stars in the background disappeared, and night turned to blood red day.

“Well?” Wolfe said.

McHartattack was the first one to break the silence. “Does anyone wanna come over to my place tonight and play mental ping pong? I’ve got a few truckloads of Papa Porcelain’s being delivered,” McHartattack offered.

“I’m still waiting to trade sex slaves,” Pits whined.

“What the fuck? Was nobody even paying attention?” Wolfe snarled.

“Yeah, but we need a sexy way to sell it to the masses,” Doors said. “I’m better at that sort of thing than you, Wolfe. I should be in charge of the Mind Grid marketing campaign!”

“Hey, I just thought up a groovy idea,” Pits mused. “Once everyone’s connected to Mind Grid we could play bumper cars with citizens, remote controlling them to crash into each other and into buildings and stuff. Remember how we all got tired of playing Giuseppe Cart at our Papa Porcelain parties at Viktimstein’s? This would be way better!”

Wolfe groaned inwardly. The fact that these guys could rule over anybody was a testament to how truly idiotic the rest of the species was.

Suddenly, Savior Deth of Tarky Tarla appeared to be receiving a call on his intphn. His face turned serious as he answered the unseen caller with hushed, brief sentences. It seemed whoever was on the other line was calling about something urgent. He addressed Wolfe. “Savior Wolfe, General Wagstaffe has been trying to reach you. Apparently your link was turned off during the presentation. He said to inform you that the mediator Kristal Silverberg—the one with the special powers—has escaped. Plus, she claimed she has stolen all your memories…and she says she is going to report all your plots and schemes to the whole world! Now she is with some fugitives in the wilderness getting away!”

Suddenly, a murmur went up through the crowd.

Deth continued. “Wolfe, this is an outrageous slip-up on

your part! If this is true and she releases all our plans to the public, this could possibly bring down the entire system of Corporate Salvation! Do you know what this means? This means I won't be able to keep selling liquid sugar to the masses!"

"Yes, and we won't be able to keep living in huge bunkers with hundreds of sex slaves! We're doomed!" Bigscam Young piped up.

Suddenly there was an uproar among the Corporate Saviors.

"I can't believe you let her go!" Doors said. "How could you make such a gross error and let something like this happen! This is almost as egregious a mistake as my naming my company TinyLimp!"

"Wolfe, your carelessness is a threat to all of us! I'll never invite you to my mental pong parties again!" McHartattack screamed.

"We should kick him out of the Corporate Saviors! I knew we never should have let in this white trash hooligan!" Tard howled.

Chaos erupted in the meeting hall.

Smelling the tension in the air, Pits declared, "Yes, I agree with all of you! But I still want to trade slaves afterwards, okay, Ron?" Pits looked pleadingly at Wolfe.

"Enough!" Wolfe roared.

The tumult immediately died down. You could hear a virtual pin drop.

"What do you guys know about anything? I was the one who built the system of Thought Management we have now! Without me, you're all doomed! You're just a bunch of lazy, pampered philanderers, all thanks to the systems I put in place by my hard work and persistence. Do you want to go back to the old-fashioned forms of mind control?"

There was a faint murmur in the crowd. No one dared contest him.

"I didn't think so. Now, as for the case of this one meager lardass woman, consider the matter already settled. I shall attend to it personally. And as all of you know, whatever I set out to do gets done immediately! Not like half of you nitwits here. I'm looking at you, McHartattack."

McHartattack had gone back to picking his nose but suddenly sat up straight, pretending to act serious. “Well, hmmf!” he said in his clown voice. “If it wasn’t for my corporations’ food, with only your corporation’s food alone, Ron, the citizens would only be half as fat as they are right now. I’ll have everyone know that I make a considerable contribution to the Salvation of our citizens.”

“Whatever, booger-eater,” Wolfe growled. “Regardless, forget about the woman and her bogus claims. Her ass is mine. Now—”

“I wasn’t thinking about her ass, Ron,” Pits interjected hopefully. “I was thinking about your naked slaves’ asses. Are we still gonna bargain afterwards?”

“Take your hand out of your toga, Pits!” Wolfe scowled at him.

Pits, a sheepish look on his face, pulled his virtual hand out of his virtual toga, where it had been fondling his virtual balls.

Wolfe went on. “And shut your cake hole when I’m talking. Now, this lardass Kristal Silverberg, may I remind you, is in the middle of nowhere in the wilderness and, like all other citizens in our glorious system of Corporate Salvation, has absolutely no survival skills. As you all know, the lardasses are completely dependent on the Corporations—on us—to survive. Without a fucking cheeseburger—or a Dinkie, or a Twing Twong, or some fucking Tar Colored Liquid Sugar—she’ll soon keel over like the weakling that all the citizens are. Away from her beloved Corporations, like a fish out of water, she’ll probably die on her own before I can even get to her. As you all know, that’s why we have this system of Corporate Salvation in the first place. No citizen is a threat to us as long as they all depend on us—and only us—for their day-to-day, second-to-second existence. We have a monopoly on everything they need to exist. Now, if you’ll excuse me, I have a huge fat woman’s ass to demolish.”

DIARY OF THE UNSAVED: LEARNING TO FLY

The young man stood in the forest listening to the Native American man with the pony tail talk. The man's face was weathered and his dark eyes flickered with the wisdom of the ages.

The young man's transformation was complete.

He had shed the massive baggage of corporate adipose weighing him down, destroying his health. Homo Sapiens Corporatus had transformed into Homo Sapiens Novus. His body had reached the pinnacle of perfection. Bulging, sinewy muscles. A six-pack. He looked like an entirely different person than the saved youngster who had arrived here a year ago. And he was.

"Now you are ready, young man, to begin the training."

Although he was excited, the young man was also a bit nervous. He was worried about his ability to learn this, the most essential skill to the Unsaved.

"You have learned many freeing technologies during your time here. You have learned how to grow food, how to hunt, how to survive in the wilderness. That means you now are a completely free and independent man. You no longer need a boss, parent, spouse, or politician telling you 'you have to do this, or 'you have to do that.' Unqualified and absolute freedom. You no longer even need us. If you wanted to, you could wander off into the wilderness and grow your own food and do your own thing, could you not?

"Yes, thanks to what all of you here have taught me. But I like you guys. You guys aren't like those people in Corporate Society that like to boss other people around and tell them what to do. I think I'll stick around."

"All of the technologies we use here among the Unsaved are freeing technologies. Growing food is a freeing technology. Knowing how to survive in the wild is a freeing technology. Building your own shelter is a freeing technology. Do you want to learn yet one more freeing technology, so you can roam even faster, and freer, whenever and wherever you want, like a bird sailing through the sky?"

"Yes, that's why I'm here."

The ponytailed man spoke as he stroked his beardless chin.

"First, let's learn about the history of this particular freeing technology. Once upon a time, after watching the ancient anime film from the 1990s known as 'Ninja Scroll,' someone thought to themselves, 'I just ***have*** to do that in real life,' and then set out, day after day, to make their dream a reality."

"Let me guess, that someone was you?"

"No, that someone was the first guy who had the idea. Sadly, he's dead."

"Oh…but probably he led a long and fulfilling life, right?"

"No, actually he died about two days later while unsuccessfully trying his idea. And so did the next five guys who came along after him and tried it. But I was the sixth, and I didn't die—that's the important thing! I learned by watching all those other guys what ***not*** to do, and that's what I'm going to teach you!"

The young man felt a knot in his stomach starting to form…

The ponytail man went on. "Everyone here today now has this freeing technology, thanks to the knowledge I discovered. It, along with our very existence, is one of the best kept secrets in the world! But, I am getting old. I am tired. I want to rest. I long to pass on my title to another who can take my place. I have challenged all here, but unfortunately, so far none have bested me. But who knows? Perhaps you will be the one!"

But how could the young man ever hope to become that good? Maybe in ten years, twenty years…

Just then, the ponytail man ran forward, taking a few nimble steps on the forest floor, then jumped onto a tree stump, then to a boulder, then kicked off the side of a tree trunk and finally landed on one of the branches of a tall tree. Then he dropped down, completely silently, to the earth.

He makes it look so easy, so effortless. How would I ever be able to do that?

The Native American man, as if reading his thoughts, said, "Treewalking is about redirecting your energy. It's about economy of motion. You have to understand how momentum works. Not in theory, or on paper—you have to feel it in your bones. When you live in the forest, you have to become one with your surroundings. You have to know without looking where every tree and branch is, as if it were part of your own

body. The Corporate man sits inert on his couch while his brain wanders about aimlessly in artificial reality. He complains about how he is always bored, never stopping to think that perhaps his boredom comes from his style of play, detaching his mind from his body. The Unsaved play with both their bodies and brains in reality. Not in virtuality. When every step could potentially lead to death, it never gets boring. Have you ever watched videos of the primitives engaging in the ancient art of parkour?"

"Yes, I think I stumbled across it a few times."

"Treewalking is like parkour, with the only difference being that we never have flat, solid ground under our feet. Thus, the treewalker must always be moving."

The young man knew that this man was known only to the others as Treewalker. He had taught everyone of the Unsaved the seemingly impossible skill, and it had revolutionized their lives. And now it was his turn. Still, watching others do it was one thing…doing it himself was something else entirely.

"But, it seems kind of…impossible."

"You've seen us do it, haven't you?"

"Yes, well, I mean—"

"To be human means to constantly be making the impossible possible. It used to be impossible for a human to run a mile in under four minutes. But with the advancement of running techniques that impossible goal was realized. Science and technology are the means by which humans create situations which never existed before. The corporations use science to study how to make humans fatter, weaker, dumber, lazier, and more enslaved by external devices than ever before in history. The Science of Slavery. The science of making people less skilled and more dependent. The science of making people need more and more external gadgets to survive, with the promise of convenience. You need a smartphone to survive in Corporate Society, do you not?"

"Yes. You couldn't even buy food or water without one. You'd die."

"But you've cut the umbilical cord. Tell me, how is being completely dependent on something convenient? It means you're tethered to something. Now you're not as free and unrestricted as before. And with those devices they can

gather your data and even read your thoughts. The relationship of master and slave is very convenient indeed. We, on the other hand, study the Science of Freedom. We study how humans can free themselves, not by using gadgets, but by using their own bodies and minds, becoming more powerful, more independent, more active, more in tune with nature, and with every living creature. Including these trees. Becoming completely at home in nature is also technology."

"But I always thought science and technology meant overcoming and subjugating nature, not living in harmony with it."

"Science and technology have infinite possibilities. They are completely neutral and can be developed and used for completely divergent and even conflicting purposes. And no one has a monopoly on science or technology. The corporations use technology to destroy our world, such as by making plastic bottles for Mountain Spew, which all end up in the ocean, the rivers, and lakes, or in landfills. And the strange thing is the Saved think they are somehow saving the earth by being enslaved to the corporations, even while they are filling our world with their plastic junk. It would be far better to drink from natural springs, like we do. Go to the spring, drink your fill, and come back. Get off your lazy ass, get some exercise, see some amazing views, and get refreshed in the process, without polluting our earth or poisoning your body with toxic chemicals. Convenience is the downfall of the lazy man, the downfall of Corporate Society. And doesn't the Corporate man feel compelled to get a new external smartphone every one or two years to keep up with his peers and run the latest version of the OS? Where do all those billions upon billions of smartphones with their toxic batteries go? While pushing consumerism and needless waste on a massive scale never before seen in the history of the world, the corporations pretend to be saving the planet. Ha! We, on the other hand, choose to use technology to make our world a better place. But less talk. More action!"

He sprung from his position on the ground back to his perch on the branch above, using the same steps as before.

"Now it's your turn, my friend!"

The young man crouched, getting ready. God damn it, he thought. I'm gonna kill myself.

"Wait." The ponytail man said. "Notice how I used my entire body. When I kicked off the trunk, I also pushed it away from me with my hand. And I anticipated where I would land, and angled myself accordingly."

The young man concentrated. Then, all at once, he ran forward and jumped off the stump, then the boulder, and then kicked off the tree trunk, pushing it away with his hand as the ponytail man had instructed.

Suddenly, he was sailing through the air. I'm flying! He thought. I'm really, really– oh, shit!

But instead of landing on the branch, he fell flat on his face in a ravine which was full of dead leaves and twigs.

"That was okay…for your first try." The ponytail man sat on the branch, stroking his chin, exhibiting the patience of one who had been through this process many, many times. "Again," he said firmly.

The young man didn't stir.

The ponytail man looked down at the body flat on the ground, unmoving, face-down in the leaves. "Again?"

CHAPTER 19: THE HUNT

Wolfe sat imperturbably in the middle of the cockpit of his corporate skycraft, one of his elite commando sons on either side of him checking instruments, as they smoothly glided above the Unsaved Zone, taking in the picturesque panoramic vista of snow-capped Mount Rainier and the surrounding forests and meadows. There was a large, fluffy cloud atop the venerable mountain, which made it look like it had a hat. The green military fatigues and black berets of his muscular sons contrasted with his silver toga and laurels.

Above the console in front of them floated the holographic head of General Shelton Wagstaffe, overseer of the secretive Mind Grid Smart Community prototype facility. "What?!" squawked the translucent head. The combative, diagonal eyebrows, and deep grooves of his face served as physiognomic indicators of the deeply sociopathic, sadistic mind lurking behind them. "But we know there are at least three fugitives, including the number one priority, Kristal Silverberg! Surely we must commit all available resources to finding and eliminating the threat!"

"Shutter your windpipe, Wagstaffe! I've already commanded you to call off all patrols immediately! Are you questioning the hierarchy?" Wolfe demanded with a snarl.

Hierarchy. Authority. The most fundamental value of both social constructs of unreality: the Corporation and the Government. To question this value was insanity.

The Corporation. The modern totem. The concept of hierarchy and authority went far back into human history, from the ancient tribes where the father forbade his sons from being alone with his mother. The word totem came from the language of the Algonquian Native Americans, from the word "odoodem," which meant "kinship group." But ultimately the cruel, often frightening carvings on those tall wooden poles represented those standing over you. Your father, the person who stands literally over you... He who issues forth to his sons taboos, coming from the Tongan word "tapu", meaning "prohibited." He who prohibits. He is the "Over I." The literal translation of the Latin phrase "super ego," as well as its German equivalent. That remembrance of helplessness when one was a baby in the face of the overwhelming power of the father, who literally stood over oneself. That attitude of submissiveness and weakness, along with the sadism, cruelty

and strictness of the father forever internalized into one's psyche. Forever forbidding, forever denying. Forever making one obedient to those whom one sees as "Over I." Higher up on the totem pole. Higher up on that pyramidal, fascist hierarchy embodied in that one simple word. The Corporation. Literally the opposite of democracy, which means rule from the bottom up, the hierarchy, the Corporation, means rule from the top down.

Upon hearing this challenge issued forth from his superior, Wagstaffe immediately visibly changed, his maniacal features at once becoming sycophantic and submissive, a visual embodiment of the twin psychological features of the corporate mind, the two masks every person indoctrinated into hierarchy wears at any given moment, ready to flip from one to the other at the drop of a hat. The Sadistic and the Masochistic. Fawning and complaisant to those higher on the hierarchy, while compensating for the stifling of one's aggressive, destructive drives by one's superiors not only by taking them out on one's inferiors but also by redirecting them at oneself in the grandiose act of self-annihilation. "No, your Corporateness. I shall call off the patrols at once. To question the hierarchy would be Conspiracy Theory," Wagstaffe said meekly as his holographic head faded away, invoking the phrase customary in the military and the upper echelons of the Glorious Government, signifying complete obedience to the Corporations and the Government, and the concept upon which both are predicated. The Holy Hierarchy. A religious concept, the word "hierarchy" came from the ancient Greek meaning "the rule of the high priest." Every system of hierarchy had its roots in the religious, the holy, the divine. He who needed salvation stood at the bottom of the hierarchy, and he who meted it out stood at the top.

This religious concept had been incorporated into both the military and the Corporations. A stratified system of slavery and obedience to those theoretically above you—the exact opposite of the theoretical concepts of both democracy and equality, in which all people are on the same level, and no one is above anyone else. At its core, hierarchy meant never questioning one's superiors. For a slave to question his masters was considered insanity. Thus, the purpose of Corporations and Governments, the two interlocking parts of the slavery of

modern man—who was indoctrinated from birth to believe he was not a slave, that he was free—was to maintain this stratification of power at all costs. If one were suddenly able to question anybody in the world and state one's opinion on literally everything, this person would immediately become the biggest threat to Corporations and Government, because this person's mind would be free, no longer a slave to anyone, and they could make decisions for themselves without needing permission or authorization. No overbearing father standing above them, prohibiting them. The obliteration of the Over I.

"Excellent," Wolfe said, grinning, after the hologram of Wagstaffe had faded away completely. "No one is going to take away my fun." His commando sons smirked.

Yes! This is what I live for! Wolfe seized the moment to inwardly gloat as they flew ever nearer to the camp. This is what my heart desired, what my soul needed. Thank you, Kristal Silverberg, for giving me the ultimate gift…a challenge big enough to be worthy of me, Ronald K. Wolfe, the most ambitious and daring of all Corporate Saviors. Thou has sucked the thoughts right out of my head and now you threaten to give away all my little deep dark secrets…all ***our*** deep dark secrets. You threaten to bring down this entire tedious system of Corporate Salvation so easily, with one fell blow. What good are these obedient, harmless cows we call citizens? What fun is enslaving people who want to be enslaved? Where is the challenge? Where is the merit, the glory, the conquest? Leave that to the others, lulled into their comfortable palaces and fine dining. What I live for is not to glut myself, but to fight! I don't want to be a politician, or even a pampered, jaded dictator, though surely that is what I will end up as. I want to be a ***warrior***. Even the endless fucking gets tiresome. Threaten our system! Resist! Give me what I want, what I crave! I only need one thing to be happy…

An enemy!

If Wolfe could have his way, there would be a million other Kristal Silverbergs and he would spend his days doing what he did best. Subjugating. Manipulating. Sparring. Deceiving. Overthrowing. Vanquishing. Modern corporate-saved man was so weak, so dull, so submissive. Bring me a fight, you fucking weak-willed, listless, craven, tractable, docile, gutless tubs of

jelly!

And soon, there would be Mind Grid. The end of the conflict. The end of all conflicts. The end of history. His soul sighed. That was the paradox. By pursuing his goal, he was on the verge of removing all obstacles, all challenges from his life. What a bore that will be!

He had thought many times about the possibility of creating artificial crises, artificial scenarios, to solve his problem. He could easily create a gladiator arena and fight in it. He could create a thousand other contrived scenarios, engineering for himself elaborate tests of will and strength. But, even if he was fighting real humans, disemboweling real opponents, it would all be in vain...in fact little better than a virtual simulation, like the violent video games of the ancients, which were of no use to him. Without a real threat, without life itself, uncontrived, spontaneous, threatening to ruin him, he knew it wouldn't work. Anybody could pay someone to be a fake enemy. What fun was that? But now, he had a real enemy, a real threat to his dominion! And he would face the challenge. It had been forty years since he had done anything near this exciting! He was older now, rusty, out of the game, and lacking proper equipment since this was impromptu. He had rushed straight here without any real preparation.

He had been just a boy back then. Back when he had fun everyday. A new challenge every day, every hour. Now he was rusty from success. But it didn't matter! He was a hunter, a killer, and he would hunt his prey down. He would catch her. And then, he would kill her. He already had her DNA. So now he could splurge, let loose. He was going to enjoy this.

As the Mind Grid Smart Community prototype facility came into view, Wolfe stood up and walked into the back of the craft, where five of his other elite commando sons sat ready. His sons all had primitive bodies like his. All were muscular, like him, and they all resembled him, but were from different mothers, so each one had a unique look. He had about two hundred elite sons and daughters, all of them raised in the bunkers on real food which they grew in the Unsaved Zone, without chemical fertilizers, without processing. Genetic tests were done on all fetuses in the government vats, all of which came from the Corporate Saviors' sperm—all children in society being sired by a tiny group of men—and the very best fetuses

they took and raised themselves. The cream of the genetic crop. Modern eugenics had been honed into a fine art. Some of his elite offspring were trained as corporaticians since their youth, working as top managers for his corporations. Others were politicians, engineers, artists. They all lived in the vast system of Corporate Savior bunkers underneath the Corporate Zone, hidden from the public eye. The lardasses couldn't be allowed to see that so-called "primitive" humans existed.

These commando sons of his had all been trained in the military arts like him, were all world-class assassins and soldiers. But unfortunately there wasn't a full-scale war going on, just one rogue citizen, so he wouldn't be able to share the joy with his sons.

"Strip down," he told one of his sons. "I'm going to swap clothes with you."

"Yes, father." His son obediently removed his belt, boots, green camo fatigues, undershirt, and briefs.

Wolfe took off his silver toga, laurels, and golden sandals, and passed them to his son. Naked, he took the camo fatigue top and ripped its sleeves off, and then put it on. He put on the briefs, and the fatigue pants, the belt, and the boots. He left the sleeveless fatigue top unbuttoned, exposing his chest. Lastly, he took hold of the olive green undershirt and carefully tore a piece from it, fashioning a makeshift headband. He then wrapped it around his head and tied it in the back.

"Give me your weapons," he told another son, this one carrying a long-range sniper laser rifle with scope attached. The son gave him the rifle, as well as a handgun with a hip holster, and a combat laser knife. There was a place in one of his boots for the knife, so his son slid it into place. He attached the handgun to Wolfe's belt. Then, he attached a pair of binoculars in a carrying case to the other side of his belt.

Wolfe took out the handgun from its holster. A standard-issue laser pistol. "Wait. Do you have the case I gave you?" he asked one of his sons. The son produced a metallic case and reverently opened it. Inside rested an old-fashioned bullet-firing handgun. Not just any handgun. The one Wolfe had used during the war in Thailand. He took it out of the box, hefted it, savoring its weight in his hand. Wolfe cleaned and cared for it each night, and always left it loaded. The sniper laser rifle was more accurate from long distances. But this one… A wave from

his youth was washing over him. Oh, god, the nostalgia… He inserted it into the holster on his hip.

"Now, I want you to manacle my legs and set the manacles to open only after one hour."

"But, Father–"

"Do it!"

Reluctantly, one of his sons produced a set of special programmable military manacles–PMMs–and attached them to his father's ankles. He then pressed a holo button on the side of the PMMs. A small, holographic screen appeared, protruding from the manacles. He punched a few buttons on the screen, and then the screen disappeared. "Done," he said, and stepped back.

The waiting would only make it sweeter, build the suspense. See you soon, Kristal, my darling.

"Give me a parachute."

Another one of his sons produced a parachute and helped attach it to Wolfe's back. The sniper laser rifle was designed so it could be detached into two pieces. He separated the two rifle pieces and handed them to his sons, who attached each piece to one side of the parachute bag.

He was ready.

"Open the hatch!"

They opened the hatch.

It had now started to rain.

With the manacles firmly in place, Wolfe wasn't able to walk. He hopped over to the hatch and immediately dove out head-first into the rain.

The Corporate Savior zoomed towards patches of meadow and forest below, the conifers below looking like twigs. Through the rain, he caught a glimpse of the government camp and Mount Rainier nearby from the corner of his vision. He now was slamming into falling raindrops at terminal velocity, the otherwise harmless drops biting into his flesh, as if he were being pelted by paintball pellets. The pain was sweet. He guided himself towards a meadow. The foggy ground below loomed ever larger.

He now tilted up and turned his body into a cross, his chest and eyes facing downwards. He pulled the ripcord. As he slowed, he could now see the guards atop the watchtowers at

the camp.

As the foggy field loomed ever closer, he could now make out dandelions, and what appeared to be bluish heathers. He could see a few deciduous trees nearby, and their leaves had begun changing colors. As the ground approached, he bent his knees, readying himself for impact.

As his manacled feet hit the earth, he bent his knees even more and rolled, absorbing the impact. He rolled and rolled. And then, finally, his body slowed, and rolled up one last time onto his feet. But then, with too much momentum, he pitched forward. He caught himself with his arms. He removed the parachute, and took the two sniper laser rifle pieces and attached them to one another. He lay there in the field, chest to the ground, gripping his sniper rifle.

Now, all he had to do was wait.

Run! Fly like the wind, my sweetheart. Without a headstart, you'd have no hope. So I'll wait, and make our odds even.

Now, finally, I'll have to put everything on the line! He revelled inwardly. He was back in his own element. He was back in Thailand, forty years younger. Just a boy, a young man, hunting, killing. In all his years of Corporate Saviorhood, he had never felt this good.

He lay there in ecstasy, his legs unable to move, the raindrops drenching his fatigues, the flowers pressing into his bare arms and chest.

But soon, the corner of his mouth, and then his fingers began to twitch.

He needed action. He needed blood.

It was biological. Like a man who has gone too long without sex, he found that his instincts were taking over.

He thirsted so much for the struggle, for the kill, that he began crawling forward on his elbows, gripping the rifle in both hands, pulling himself through the flowers, through the fog. Now he was a soldier again. Now, he was once again in the middle of what he loved so much.

He was in the fog of war.

The four corporate roley poleys' rotund bodies and the five Foresters' lean bodies made their way through the dark green conifers, the fog clouding their vision. All of them were drenched. It had started to rain as soon as they entered the forest.

Drake thought back to the strange words Applegate had said to him when they had gone to rescue Kristal. What the hell had he been talking about? Everything is my fault? How could he say that? He knows what the Corporate Saviors do to people, poisoning their food and medicine, enslaving them. They are the reason my father died! They are the reason I'm in this predicament right now. How could he say that? That Applegate was a weird guy. All the Foresters were.

The rain let up, and soon they reached a clearing with a mirrorlike lake with tall, solemn evergreens in the background. What appeared to be petrified tree trunks stuck up like jagged spears from the glassy surface of the placid water. The fog played about the vertical stone javelins mystically. A primordial forest, apparently, a forest of dreams, an entire paleolithic ecosystem which had died eons ago, fossilized, frozen in time, drenched in water, soaked in oblivion…

Upon seeing this dreamlike sight, Weston declared, "Almost there! Wahoo!"

"That's right," Applegate told the corporate fugitives. "From here, it's only another twenty or thirty minutes for a Forester. I'd give it about forty minutes or an hour tops for a corporate fooder."

"Can we stop for a minute?" Blayze said. "I'm exhausted." Kristal and Drake, their shoulders drooping, obviously shared his sentiment.

"Okay, let's stop for ten minutes, and then we make the last leg of the journey. It's already getting late in the day. We dilly dally too much and it'll get dark."

The rain started back up.

The nine of them stood near the edge of the lake, as rain drops hit the surface of the water, creating tiny concentric circles which seemed to emanate from the haunting ancient spears.

"Strange how we didn't even spot one patrol. Usually we at least spot one helicopter." Charlie commented, searching the

sky with a hand over his eyes to guard from the rain.

"But anyways, we made good time because of it," Stuart added.

"Yeah, if it weren't for the total lack of GG lackeys, it would have taken us a lot longer. We would have had to take more precautions. For example going around clearings like this instead of straight through them," Alphie explained to the roley poleys. "But anyways, they usually don't get this far, thanks to Thomas's wizardry. We're safe here."

Wizardry? Drake wondered what the Forester meant by that. And what could his uncle have done to affect what the patrols did out here?

Suddenly, from out of nowhere, a beam of light shot out. Drake fell to one knee as he cried out in pain. Applegate and Stuart rushed to his side. A part of Drake's pants had been singed, and a few wisps of smoke were winding their way up in the rain. Shit! What were they just saying about his uncle's wizardry?

"Damn it! Shoulda been more careful!" Applegate said as he looked around for the shooter, finding no one. "He must be sniping from an elevated position, but with this rain and fog, I can't see shit! Quick, there's a ravine hidden over there in those trees, take cover there!" He pointed in the direction of the forest, some fifteen or twenty meters off.

"Charlie and I will wait for all of you to make it first, and we'll lay down some cover fire for you!" Weston shouted. He and Charlie were the two with rifles slung over their backs.

"I'll run to the camp and get backup!" Alphie yelled.

Drake hobbled along, Applegate and Stuart on either side of him, supporting him, while Blayze, Kristal, and Thomas ran as fast as their corpulent bodies could take them towards the forest. Alphie began sprinting ahead, while Charlie and Weston pulled the rifles off their backs, walking slowly behind the four roley poleys, firing in the direction the laser had come from.

Drake thought about activating S.H.I.Z., but it wouldn't have accomplished anything. He needed the Forester's help to move, and it would have just confused them and slowed them down if he suddenly became invisible. Damn it! I should have been more careful. I should have been invisible this whole time, even if the others complain that it makes it harder for

them to know if I'm still with them.

As they finally reached the line of trees, Applegate pointed out a nearby ravine and ushered the roley poleys into it. He and Stuart began to cover their large bodies with pine cones, twigs, needles, dirt, anything they could scoop up from their surroundings. Drake was no expert at tactics, but he realized they needed to hole up in here until reinforcements could show up, or until, with any luck, their assailant (or assailants) gave up and went away.

Eventually, Applegate and Stuart had covered the roley-poleys the best they could, as well as themselves.

"S.H.I.Z. On," Drake muttered almost silently to himself as he activated his invisible mode. Now he could use it.

Then it hit Drake, as he lay there covered by detritus. Where were Charlie and Weston?

The hunter padded silently through the forest, stalking his prey, his finger on the trigger of his laser rifle, raindrops tracing glistening rivulets of reflected light down the sleek, tan, exposed muscles of his chest and arms. He was getting dangerously close to the Radioactive Zone. His body would be cooked and he would end up a corpse, decomposing, a permanent fixture in the landscape. But it didn't matter. He had to risk it. He had to finish what he came here to do. He was so close. He wouldn't let his quarry drag him even another kilometer towards the danger. He would end this here and now, and make it out unscathed.

Plus, he was in the middle of the thrill of the hunt, almost towards the moment of pure ecstasy, the orgiastic ripping apart of his prey.

Oh, Kristal darling…come out, come out, wherever you are! Where had they gone? Wolfe had spotted the group in a clearing and taken out two of the primitives—a clean headshot each—only managing to get one non-fatal shot in on one of the renegade lardasses. He had planned on picking them off one at a time and leaving Kristal for last, so he could savor the kill.

Now he neared the clearing where they had been when he had shot them. Where had the lardasses run off to? They couldn't have gone far. What was even more intriguing was, where had these primitives come from? Did this mean the rumors were true?

He decided to circumnavigate the clearing. They obviously weren't there, and going out there would just give them a clean shot. As he stealthily plodded along, he approached a long ravine. He decided to go around it. Suddenly, his hunter instinct kicked in, and he rolled to one side. A shot rang out. A primitive man exploded from dead branches and dirt at the bottom of the ravine and started popping off shots at him with an old-fashioned, bullet-type handgun. Wolfe dodged them with ease, and then squeezed the trigger on his laser rifle. The primitive man's chest exploded with energy as he howled in pain and dropped to the ravine bottom.

Then they must be here! The lardasses would be hard to conceal. Wolfe approached the ravine. Suddenly, he noticed something sparkle in the dirt and pine cones. Someone was taking aim at him! With the finesse of a natural born killer, he fired in the direction of the sparkle. Another shriek of pain. He

sent a few more shots into the pine cones to seal the deal.

Now he could see the outline of two large corporate-saved bodies at the bottom of the ravine. He walked towards them in anticipation. He aimed his rifle at the bodies.

"This is going to be fun! Thank you, Kristal Silverberg, for giving meaning to my life! And now....you're going to give me even more meaning in death! But don't worry, I'm going to make this slow and enjoyable. Now, raise your hand, Kristal, so I know who to kill last. Ah, fuck it, we'll choose the first one at random to commence the slow painful death on. Eenie, meeny, miney, moe...catch a lardass by the–"

All of a sudden, something popped up out of the leaves. What? An impossibly futuristic looking gun with dazzling turquoise lights...suspended in the air by itself? What the hell? Was this person invisible? Who had developed this technology? And on whose orders? How had he been left out of the loop? And what about that gun? Didn't look like any firearm Wolfe had ever seen. Suddenly the turquoise lights turned red, and there was an electronic whoosh.

But Wolfe had already dropped to one side. He kept his laser rifle trained on the gun. He squeezed the trigger, and the gun went flying into the forest.

From this angle he wouldn't have hit the invisible man, only disarmed him. The Corporate Savior got back to his feet and started moving quickly in the direction of the sound of running feet. He didn't want to lose his prey. With his hunter eyes, he could now make out leaves being crushed underfoot. Yes. The invisible man. I see you! Time to die!

He smiled, aimed his laser rifle, and–

Just then, something wrapped around his legs, and he lost his balance. His body lurched forward. He lost his grip on the rifle, and it landed a few feet in front of him. The thing around his legs...it was a bolas! And, strangely, it had appeared to come from above, from the trees...

As he fell forward, seemingly in slow motion, suddenly a bunch of forms appeared out of nowhere, all around him. What? How did they do that? He couldn't see where they had come from...it was uncanny.

Wolfe looked up to find himself surrounded by a group of primitives, each with an old fashioned, bullet-firing rifle slung

over his back. The primitives took their rifles off their backs, all at once, and trained them on Wolfe.

What the hell? His hunter instincts hadn't even alerted him to their presence. And how did they move like that?

He was suddenly outnumbered, outmanned. There had to be at least ten or twelve of them.

He looked at his laser rifle, a few feet from where he lay. One of the primitives shouted, "You try to grab that laser rifle and you're a dead man!"

Another primitive approached from the front and kicked his laser rifle away. Wolfe suddenly unholstered the handgun from his hip and aimed it at the man in front of him. But it was too late. He heard a rustling sound from behind, and turned around just in time to see the butt of a rifle slamming into his forehead.

All went black.

The young man had finally gotten up after that first painful fall. In fact, although he had fallen several more times, the young man had become addicted to treewalking. Every free moment he was perfecting his technique. He couldn't stop. It was the most amazing thing he had ever experienced. The rush. The exhilaration. The freedom. He was now playing with reality the way the Saved played in their sims.

In fact, as it turned out, it seemed like he had been born to treewalk. But if he had never come to this place, never tried, he would never have found out. He would have lived his whole life and died without knowing his true potential. So apparently this had served as a lesson to keep trying new things, keep exploring your talents, even the ones you don't yet know you have...

He was so addicted, and it came so naturally for him, that he finally challenged the old Native American to a treewalking race...and won. He had now earned the title Treewalker, and was the best at treewalking of any of the Unsaved. The old man was thankful for his opportunity to rest and congratulated him on the achievement.

Now, he could move swiftly to anywhere he needed to go in the blink of an eye. In fact, he hardly even touched the ground anymore. It seemed quaint, antiquated, old-fashioned. Those untechnologically advanced ground blimps in the Corporate Zone, they were restricted to the earth. But not him.

He had been one of those unadvanced ground blimps, waddling around on the earth below. But technology had changed all of that. The technology of the Unsaved.

And the more he trained and perfected his treewalking technique, the more tight, powerful, and compact his body became. His muscles were bulging even more. His frame was becoming ever more sinewy. And now, he had wings. Now, he could fly. He felt like a god.

One evening he was restless and decided to go out for a treewalk. Instead of living in that temporary land hut, he had now built his very own tree hut, high above the ground. He stepped out of his hut and ran along a branch, then dove out

into the air as if in some kind of suicide maneuver, but then deftly grabbed a nearby branch and swung off it, landing with his feet positioned like a skateboarder on a long, sloping branch, which he slid down and then nimbly hopped onto a nearby branch. With two quick steps he kicked off against a trunk and grabbed another branch and swung himself forward into the night. He was in full control of his body, tilting, stretching, grasping. Redirecting, staying always in motion, always keeping his momentum where he wanted it to go.

It was summer, and he was clad in only a loincloth. The cool night breeze whipped along his exposed skin as he whizzed through the forest night, the rush of pure, clean air, the beautiful woodland all around him invigorating his body and soul. There was a full moon out, and its brightness illuminated the way.

Suddenly, he noticed something. He stopped, resting on a branch. From his perch he could see, far below, at the bottom of a waterfall, there was a beautiful female form bathing. He slowly, stealthily, moved along some branches to another tree from which he had a better view.

Since he had arrived here among the Unsaved, he had been floored by the exquisite, exotic beauty of the women. The Saved knew only corporate bodies, gigantic things full of adipose. So it was simply not possible for men in Corporate Society to see a woman like this in real life. They simply didn't exist. With the rise of the corporations and their artificial food, slender women had become a thing of the past. Only virtual reality approximations of them existed. The women in their reality looked like a sumo wrestler who had stopped training and become completely formless and wobbly. But here it was like slipping through some pocket in time into a magical place where women with perfect bodies still existed.

On top of that, the Saved were denied even the possibility of coitus. A penis entering a vagina was punishable by the fire of eternal damnation, which meant giving up one's body to someone else, and becoming a digital vessel of wrath. The government vats were the only allowed way to procreate. But here in this place, there was no ban on sliding a penis into a vagina. Nevertheless, the young man still had not performed the ancient art yet. Only recently had his penis gained the new ability to grow in size, rising by itself and growing stiff. The

years and years of government chemicals to suppress this wicked phenomenon had finally worn off, here among the Unsaved, growing and eating his own food, exercising constantly, and getting plenty of deep, restorative sleep.

There had been one other problem. Although he had spent much of his time adoring these voluptuous females and thinking about their bodies, he had felt nervous around them, awkward, too afraid to make any moves.

As he stood there, perched on the branch, watching the naked beautiful young woman caress her body under the clear, glassy stream of water, he could feel the new power in his penis begin to manifest. He had a perfect view from here. Her large round breasts and pink nipples were bathed in the glorious moonlight. Her nipples stood up, perky and delicious. Her thighs were the creamy color of milk in the moonglow. As she turned around, he could see her long blonde hair, which reached to her butt, and admire those nice, round, pink butt cheeks. His penis was rising under his loincloth. How he longed to place his standing penis in between those delicious buns and rub it around, making it feel good, nestled in that scrumptious crack. He longed to feel that crack with his fingers, run his tongue along it, and along those smooth ass cheeks. And he wouldn't even be killed for doing it, here in this place!

He had seen this particular young woman before. She liked to come and bathe in this spot in the moonlight. Often, after watching her, he would go back to his hut and rub his stiff penis while thinking about her until some white gooey stuff would squirt out. The first time it happened, it had caught him totally unawares and hit him straight in the eye. He longed to have that gooey stuff come out in her presence, and perhaps hit her in the eye with it, or cover her beautiful face with it. He imagined those sparkling eyes and wanton, soft lips covered in his gooey stuff, dripping with it.

The young woman dropped backwards face-up in the water and started doing a lazy backstroke. After a time, she stood up, got out of the water, and put on her leather bikini, which lay on the shore.

Wait! Don't go! He shouted inside himself, stretching his arm forward automatically, as if to magically hold her in place. He momentarily lost his balance, which was rare nowadays. He

fell, but quickly grabbed a nearby branch. But it was too late. He had made a noise, and now the beautiful young woman looked up, and, realizing someone else was there, suddenly leaped up to a nearby tree and started treewalking away.

Damn it! She's getting away! But I don't want to go home and let out my gooey stuff all alone. I want you to be there when I do it! But how do you go about explaining to a young lady that you want to show her your penis and rub out gooey stuff on top of her? Never mind, he thought. It doesn't matter. I'm not going to lose sight of her! This is a perfect challenge for my already impressive and growing treewalking abilities.

And so he arranged his loincloth the best he could so that his boner wasn't totally sticking out and plunged out forward into the night, reaching out with all his limbs, bounding off branches, kicking off trunks, from time to time swinging off an occasional rope which had been carefully placed by the Unsaved to help them sail over large gaps between trees such as over rivers. Always in complete control, always redirecting, always staying in motion.

He looked down and realized his boner hadn't stayed under his loincloth like it was supposed to, and was instead flopping around naked with every step. Oh, well. If it wants to flop, let it flop. I need to catch my prey. If any one had seen him in that moment, he would have looked ridiculous. A man flying through the trees with his boner waving about like a magician's wand.

And he kept her in his sights the whole time. Her lithe form skipped from tree to tree, from branch to branch. He could tell she sensed his presence, knew she was being chased. But despite keeping up with his pace, keeping out of distance, she even threw in some flourishes, spinning around a branch like a gymnast, only to propel herself forward, and skip along some branch below, continuing her course. She also twirled around tree trunks at a dazzling speed as she continued driving herself forward. It was the most amazing thing he had ever seen. More impressive than any Olympic gymnast, more seductive than any pole dancer. He had to catch up with her. He had to squirt his stuff in her eye. Perhaps they would even engage together in the ancient practice of putting penises inside of vaginas. It was the most thrilling ride of his life as his arms kept catching branches and swinging forward. He

completely lost all sense of time and place. He was frozen in this eternal moment, his prey the most beautiful thing he had ever seen, a woman with sparkling eyes, round jiggly boobs, and a juicy butt, and his penis longing to be with her.

Thrust forward! Thrust, thrust! Push, propel! Speed forward like a demon. Catch thy prey!

Now she had started looking back at her predator, taking careful note of his position. He was gaining on her. He was so good at treewalking that no one could get away from his grasp! All at once she spun around like a gymnast on a branch, propelled herself forward, flipping several times, and then landing gracefully below. She looked up at him with a big smile, as if he were her audience and she had just performed that dazzling feat for him and him alone.

She had stopped! That meant…You're mine! He thought as he dove off a branch and then rolled onto the ground next to her.

They were standing near the top of a waterfall in a small clearing.

She smiled and looked him in the eye. Her enchanting green eyes sparkled in the moonlight. She then started walking backwards, away from him, into the water. After she had taken a few steps into the water, she took off her bikini top, exposing her ample, shapely breasts and pink erect nipples. She threw the bikini top ashore. She then removed her bikini bottom, exposing her naked crotch, and then threw it, too, on the shore.

"Are you the young man they call Treewalker?" she said.

"Yes," he replied. A little bit ashamed, he had tucked his boner back into his loincloth while he had fallen gracefully to the earth, but his loincloth wasn't doing a very good job at hiding the fact that his penis was still standing straight up.

She eyed his loincloth lustfully. "Show me your penis."

He hesitated, and then removed the loincloth, exposing his standing, stiff penis.

She eyed his erection, a little smile playing along the corners of her mouth. "Come here," she said.

He walked forward into the water. He was now only a couple yards from her.

"Make love to me, here in the water," she said.

The young man was confused. Make love? Was love the ancient art of putting penises inside vaginas?

"I was thinking I could squirt my oozy stuff in your eye," he said.

Now they were within arm's distance. She reached down and grabbed his penis. Oh, god. The soft touch of her delicate fingers wrapped around his penis felt so good. He almost wanted to let the oozy stuff out now. He could feel it building up inside him.

Next to where the water dropped off into the waterfall was a really shallow part with smooth rocks. Holding on to his penis, she guided him over to the shallow part of the water overlooking the steep fall. Slowly, she lay down with her back against smooth stones, right at the edge of the waterfall. Since she was holding his dong, he got down with her, too. He was now on top of her.

Suddenly, it began to rain. Glistening beads of water began rolling off his hardened physique onto her soft, smooth, glowing skin.

As she looked him in the eyes, she continued holding his erection, and pulled it forward, guiding him in. Now he could feel the tip of his penis as it pressed against her, in between her legs. She continued staring into his eyes. Then she grabbed his buttocks and pulled him toward her, and began rocking him forward into her using her hands gripping his ass to guide his hips.

He was now thrusting his penis forward and back, the tip pressing into her. At first, her vagina was closed up under the brisk water. But now, with the tip of his penis pushing methodically into it, it started to open. It felt really soft and easy for him to push in. The tip went in, as he kept thrusting his hips. It seemed like his hips were moving on their own now. Like his body knew what to do, and all he had to do was give in. And all the while, she refused to break eye contact. She kept looking deep into his soul with those bright, moonlit eyes.

As he felt her vagina open and his penis slide in, a wave of elation pored over his body. It was like his penis was on fire. His whole body was now moving on its own, automatically, like a ten thousand horsepower locomotive. His hips were thrusting into her spontaneously, naturally, as if they were created for

this job. His penis was sliding in and out, in and out, keeping rhythm. She closed her eyes, tilted her head back, and let out a soft moan. Even though he was doing all the work now, she continued to grip his buttocks, holding him close, pressing him deeper into her. Presently, he began to thrust more forcefully, rapidly, penetrating her, impaling her with all his might, over and over. He couldn't help himself. He was overcome. The warm, wet place inside her was feeding the flames of the euphoric fire in his penis. His heart was beating rapidly. His strong arms had been holding his body up, trying not to squish her. But now, he wanted to squish her, to pin her down under his weight, to demolish her, crush her, to obliterate her with his penis. He pressed down onto her body, her erect nipples and soft breasts pressing into his rock-solid chest. The two bodies kept getting closer and closer, becoming one. As his muscular mass crushed into her, she became even more aroused, moaning louder, more energetically, and clearer into the night sky. He was now thrusting with all his might, violently, with reckless abandon. All he wanted to do now was be inside of her, all the way inside of her, as far as he could possibly go.

Ram, ram, push, push, harder, harder, faster, faster…He was becoming more bestial and savage with every thrust. He felt something building up inside him, like a raging tsunami, a seismic sea wave, ready to smash down everything in the world.

And then, something happened. It felt like an atomic bomb, exploding in his crotch.

As the mushroom cloud expanded, he shouted out, closing his eyes.

He could feel the eruption bursting forth, surging out from deep inside him, shooting out forcefully, going into her. He gave one last forceful thrust of his hips as hard as he could, ramming himself into her as deep as he could possibly go, and then pinned her down there, under him, pushing as much of his flow into her as possible, not letting up, even after the flow had subsided and had become only a trickle, holding her there, making it all go in her.

And then, he flopped over to the side, exhausted, and lay next to her.

Had he been too forceful, there at the end? Had he been too violent in his thrusting back and forth? He felt like he had

become an animal. He couldn't stop it. He was a beast. What had he become? His sculpted body, now steeped in testosterone, freed from the chains of Corporate Society had become a force of its own, full of vigor and animalism. It had its own voracious appetite which couldn't be satiated. He couldn't imagine his Corporate body from the past ever doing a brutal act like that.

Maybe she would reprimand him. Maybe she would claw his eyes out for the brutish manner in which he had treated her. Maybe she would bash his head in with a rock.

As these thoughts raced through his mind, she turned towards him and then laid her head on his shoulder and put her hand on his chest, feeling his sculpted pects. She lay there, silent, clinging to him. She seemed to feel at home with him. She seemed to now long to be close to him, to feel connected with him.

Awkwardly, the moment of autonomic, barbaric instincts having passed, he put his hand on her head and began to stroke it.

They lay for a time like this, unmoving.

Then, after a while, they turned their bodies, so that both were lying on their sides, looking out over the edge of the waterfall. He gripped her from behind, pressing his thing, which had become once again stiff, into her butt crack, as they both took in the gorgeous view of the forest, and the flowing river twinkling sensuously in the moonlight, as the raindrops precipitated a pattern of interlacing circular ripples on the reflection of the glowing, round full moon.

The next day, after he woke up, he wrote in his diary:

I have put my penis inside a vagina for the first time. It's unlike anything I have ever felt in my entire life. She said that here they call it "sex." And she wants to do it with me all the time from now on.

CHAPTER 20: REVELATIONS

Charlie, Weston, Stuart, and Applegate had all died, giving their lives to protect the roley poleys. Alphie had rushed back with about ten Foresters, who had saved their lives. Now, it was getting dark, and the Foresters were setting up camp. They had done a perimeter check and determined that the assassin had come alone. The threat from patrols was very low in this area, but they were determined to take shifts keeping guard during the night. Drake being injured, it would not be wise to attempt the last leg of the journey with him in his current condition now, in the dark. So it had been decided to let him rest up and finish the journey tomorrow.

Also, there was the matter of Wolfe to be dealt with. The Foresters had immediately bound Wolfe's hands and feet with rope, and had even built a makeshift cage using branches to hold him, in case he were some kind of escape artist and tried to get free from his bonds. There had been an argument about whether to kill him. Since he was a Corporate Savior, his sudden disappearance would not go unnoticed. They knew the direction he had gone. They would send out teams. But on the other hand, if they let him live he could also return with more men. So it was decided to wait until the morning and decide what to do with him. Some of the Foresters went to work starting a campfire, others headed off for a nearby spring to fill their canteens and bring them back to the exhausted roley poleys, while still others bandaged Drake's leg. Luckily, Drake's wound had been mostly superficial, nothing too serious. He'd be able to walk in the next day or two.

Even more Foresters arrived, bringing food. Everyone sat around the campfire as they dined on duck and an assortment of fresh vegetables—tomatoes, cucumbers, carrots. Someone brought apples for dessert. It was strange, eating food that wasn't full of chemicals, artificial flavoring, preservatives, and other industrial toxins. But curiously enough, the food tasted not so bad. Must be the fact that we're all starving, Drake decided. The meal had been satisfying and his stomach felt a million times better than it had a little while ago. But he still craved Dinkies.

"Don't worry," one of the Foresters named Jared reassured Drake, as if reading his mind. "The cravings will pass. It just takes time to get it out of your system."

"***You*** were a Corporate man?" Blayze asked, astonished.

"Yes, I like you, was once a Corporate man." Jared replied. It was hard for Drake to imagine this man with a corporate-saved body. He had dirty blonde hair and a reddish mustache, broad shoulders, gigantic biceps, and a lean and sinewy body. Something like a cross between a lumberjack and a ninja. "The chemicals and artificial bullshit the corporations put in the food, including corn syrup and processed sugar, is all highly addictive. You'll experience withdrawals for a couple of weeks."

As Blayze continued talking with Jared, Drake looked around the campfire. The rest of the Foresters were talking with his uncle, asking him questions, deep in thought at his answers. The conversation seemed to revolve around their struggle with the Corporate Zone, and they seemed to look at Thomas as someone they could trust, someone they depended on. They were asking him for updates on the technology in the Corporate Zone, and how to make sure they could stay hidden and autonomous.

Huh? This doesn't make any sense, he thought to himself. His uncle had just escaped into the Unsaved Zone, along with him, had he not? How could they already know him so well? They seemed to be on far better terms with his uncle than he was. What gives? Why am I always the one left out?

Finally, Thomas noticed Drake's confused glances. He held up a hand to silence the Foresters for a moment and turned to Drake.

"I'm sorry Drake. We haven't really had a chance to talk. I'm not going to find a perfect time for this. I guess now is as good as any."

Everyone in the camp fell silent. All eyes were on Thomas.

"Drake, I invented MindLink."

"You– what?"

Invented…

Drake suddenly felt woozy. His uncle…the inventor of…? His face went white. He felt dizzy.

But…MindLink? The digital cerebral interface. The technology upon which the smartphones, and the Corporate Savior's entire system of Thought Management was predicated.

"Yes, Drake. And there's more, much more…I was also on

the team that developed the EMF technology upon which…"

But he wasn't listening. How could that be? MindLink created by my own uncle! In Govly Academy every good little citizen had been taught since vathood that MindLink had been invented by Musky Balls, the father of Musky Pits.

Drake interrupted his uncle. "But in Govly Academy–"

"Much–or rather, most–of what they teach in Govly Academy is a lie. The Corporate Saviors actually create very little. They just claim to be the creators of all that modern society uses, depends upon. But in reality they just take credit for inventions that other people–such as myself–create. The supposed digital cerebral interface that Musky Balls created was a farce. It didn't work. They released videos and press kits, but it was all fakery. They didn't have a real, working DCI until years later, when I created it. The technological timeline they teach you is all a lie."

MindLink was an essential part of the equipment which the mentists and Reality Fixers used. If this was true, none of the current system would have been possible without Drake's uncle and his invention.

"They lied to me, Drake. They told me it would be used for good causes. After I saw what they used it for, I…"

The sound of his uncle's words faded out. The dizziness intensified. Like the world he knew had suddenly started to whirl around him. A sudden feeling of anger and frustration welled up in him. Why hadn't his uncle told him earlier? Why was he only learning all this now? And if his uncle knew all this, knew the Corporate Saviors were liars and con artists, taking credit for other people's creations, they could have teamed up years ago, decades ago, and taken action. But no, Drake was left on his own, to his own devices, while his uncle did god knows what all these years.

God damn it! My entire life…a lie! Raised at Govly Academy…indoctrinated to love my Corporate Saviors. And then working for the very system I detest. And my own god damn uncle knew all along. And he never said a thing! Just left me wallowing in my misery.

It was all too much. First, the long and arduous hike. Then, being hit with the sniper rifle. And now this.

Suddenly Drake felt himself lurching, falling backwards.

He blacked out.

Drake woke up in a lean-to the Foresters had built for him. Through silhouetted tree tops he could glimpse misty swirls of stars. It seemed like there were millions upon millions more stars visible here than in the Corporate Zone. He had been out for a few hours, apparently. His uncle and Kristal were sitting nearby, keeping watch over him. Their eyes flickered in the light of the torch in Kristal's hand. A few paces away stood the Forester named Jared, whom Drake had met earlier. Jared was holding a rifle and watching the forest.

As Drake lay there, recovering, he listened to his uncle's words, trying to control his rage.

"Drake," Thomas was saying. "I'm sorry. I know it was too much. You've been through a lot these last few days. It was careless of me to go and change everything in your world all at once."

Last few days? Try last twenty years, Drake thought bitterly.

"Drake, your uncle isn't a bad man," Kristal was pleading. "He's explained to me so many things. Just let him explain. It had to be this way. Just give him a chance to talk."

Great, so soon into his relationship with Kristal, and she was already taking sides with his uncle. Figures.

"I'm listening," Drake droned. What choice do I have? They had cornered him.

"Drake," Thomas said. "There are things you didn't know about your parents. Are you feeling well enough? We can talk later if you prefer to rest." Then, to Kristal, "I think it's better for him to rest. We can talk again later when he's feeling better."

"Tell me now," Drake rasped, and shut his eyes. His uncle still had a lot of questions to answer. About how he had disappeared, for all those years. And then suddenly reappeared and pronounced himself the creator of the technology behind the prison that was called "society." What more could he say now that would phase him?

That's right. This is all your fault, Uncle. My own uncle…the creator of MindLink! The Corporate Savior's tool of oppression! The entire system of slavery we live under is my own uncle's doing!

No, Let's just get it over with. Let's find out everything he has to say. No more hiding. No more games.

"Okay, then. Look, I've never been good at talking to people.

What I'm good at is sitting in my lab all day tinkering. I don't even know where to start."

"You can start by telling me where the hell these skinnies are taking us!"

"We are going to the place your father died for, Drake."

"Ha! My father was a dreamer. No such place exists." Did he really think they were going to survive out here in the wilderness? All indications pointed towards no. Even if they could survive, it must be a measly existence. It would have been better to hide out somewhere in the CZ and figure out a way to strike at them. They were losing valuable time out here and might not even make it out alive. "What else did you want to tell me?"

"Your mother's death. It wasn't an accident."

Wasn't an accident? But she had died of a heart attack. It had happened while Drake was in Govly Academy under the tutelage of the Glorious Government. He never even knew his mother.

Thomas continued. "The medication she was taking for her diabetes… diazatrilphrilmotram."

"Diazatrilphrilmotram? Are you sure it wasn't diazomotrilzephylaxtram? They sound kind of similar."

"I'm sure. Diazatrilphrilmotram. Magic Pill #789. The CSO of MagicPillCo, Oprest Viktimstein, knew that it caused heart attacks in one of three patients who used it in the clinical trials, and yet he still allowed his corporation to market it. Her venditor also knew it could possibly kill her, but prescribed it to her anyways to get his kickback from MagicPillCo. Her death could have easily been prevented, if it weren't for the greed of the pharmaceutical corporation and her venditor. They teach us in Govly Academy that it's impossible for the people running the Corporations to be greedy, that to think they are anything but saints is a Conspiracy Theory. But that's all hogwash."

So his mother…killed by the Corporate Saviors, too. By their deadly salesmen, the venditors.

Drake felt his heart being torn apart. Now he had even more reasons to hate the Corporate Saviors. "If you knew about all these things the Corporate Saviors were doing, then why didn't you talk to me about it? I had those Hacking Tools you sent me! You could have talked to me in secret. We could

have worked together to bring the whole system down!" His whole life, all alone. One man trying to fight an entire system. The system that murdered both of his parents. And his uncle did nothing. Said nothing.

"I was held hostage. I wasn't allowed to contact anyone. I was forced to keep working for them, developing their systems of oppression, without any contact with the outside world."

"Except of course with the Foresters, right? I mean, they treat you like old friends. Why did you keep your own nephew out of the loop?

Thomas sighed. "For your safety, Drake. I did it for your safety. Yes, I was able to sometimes hack through their systems and stay in touch with the Crypto Railroad. But it was a gamble. Encryption isn't 100% foolproof. Nothing is. I took a big risk even sending you that one email. If they had found out about my dealings with the Crypto Railroad, I could have ended up like your father. But at least you'd still be alive. But if I had been in contact with you the whole time... they search through your immediate contacts, Drake, go through all your networks, and destroy everyone they can find, root out the threat completely. I couldn't have you be part of the network. I couldn't take that risk. And so, after I sent you that email, I decided that I had been wrong to expose you to that risk, and that it would be better, for your safety, to never do it again."

"But twenty years? Twenty years of solitude, of not knowing anything!"

He felt like his entire being was being crushed in a vise. The entire weight of his life, pressing down on him. And all of the pressure, being turned into rage.

"I understand it must have been hard, Drake."

Hard? Did his uncle know how much of an understatement that was? Drake just lay there, trying to compose himself.

"Drake—"

But Drake snapped, losing all sense of composure. "Held hostage? For twenty years? If you were able to escape now, you could have escaped before. Twenty years, lost!"

"Drake—" Kristal started.

"Let me speak to my uncle, god damn it! He hasn't spoken to me for my entire life. He has some explaining to do."

Kristal looked like she wanted to say something, but decided to hold her peace. Jared the Forester stood nearby, silent, scanning the forest for possible enemies, trying not to get involved.

"I understand why you would be angry, Drake. I would be too. But the situation is just not as simple as it might seem. I had to prepare, bide my time. When Wolfe told me you were condemned to Hell, I saw my opportunity and took it. I was just barely able to convince him that I wanted to do it out of a sense of duty to my Corporate Saviors."

"But think of how much we could have accomplished together, both on the same side! Twenty years of inaction! Twenty years of both our lives wasted!"

"God damn it, Drake, don't you see? If we had worked against the system, they would have declared us Conspiracy Theorists and gotten rid of us both! Like they did to your father! I chose to let you live. I helped you get a good position in society as a Reality Fixer. I figured it was better for you to live as one of the technical elite, to at least have a little bit of freedom. We couldn't have brought the system down by ourselves! I did it to save you. To save you from your father's fate."

"My father," Drake said, his voice quavering, "was a real man." He started to choke up. He had to fight back a tear, mindful that Kristal was nearby. "He didn't cower from what needed to be done. He died a hero, fighting against the Corporate Saviors." His father had been a dreamer. But at least his father had died with honor, fighting back against his enemies. Not like his uncle, cowering in some government lab, afraid to even speak with his nephew.

Thinking about his father, Drake suddenly had an epiphany. My father was a better man than I am.

Yes, what he believed in had been a pipe dream. He wanted to make it to some mythical forest, some kind of utopia where people could survive without the Corporate Saviors, without constantly being surveilled, without corporations controlling their daily lives. As far as Drake could tell, no such place existed. Everything he had seen in the Unsaved Zone confirmed that life out here was vicious and cruel.

But, at least my father had the courage to act on his convictions, to actually do something about them, as impractical and impossible as they were. I, on the other hand, have led a life of fear, working for the enemy. Doing nothing to achieve my goals. Nothing to act on my ideals. Instead, only helping the Corporate Saviors to enslave people more. I'm a hypocrite. I'm worse than my uncle. But it was easier to take it out on his uncle than to face the stark truth: he himself, his inaction, his fear, had always been his own worst enemy.

"When they found out about your father, I had to fight tooth and nail to convince them that I wasn't involved, and also to give you those Hacking Tools. They nearly executed me, as well."

Ha! Does he realize how foolish his words are? What good is it to go through life, cowering before the system, licking the boots of your masters, like my uncle and I have been doing? Better to die fighting then to live as a slave. But Drake was no example. He had wasted his life, foolishly being part of the system, afraid to take any risks.

Thomas continued. "I knew that the more you knew, the more dangerous things would be for you. The horrors I went through, working for the Corporate Saviors, Drake. And what happened to your father. I wanted to secure as comfortable a position for you as possible without endangering you. I wanted to ride out the storm. I thought it would be too dangerous to try to escape using the Crypto Railroad. They could have easily killed you. It was a wager. A wager with your life that I wasn't willing to take. I had already lost a brother. So my answer was simply to delay, to survive. I was waiting for something to happen, some revolt, some power grab, so that the situation would change. But…it never happened."

There was a silence, as Drake let all this settle in. His uncle had saved him…for what? He had been a living dead man in the Corporate Zone, every day alone, isolated. Every day not being able to strike out and free himself. Every day giving his enemies more and more power. And now, he was a living dead man in the Unsaved Zone. No possibility of escape. No possibility of defeating his enemies from here. Without the basics of survival. He wasn't like these Foresters. He wasn't built to survive out here, in this place. That laser blast may as well have hit my chest, he thought.

Kristal finally spoke. “I think you should listen to your uncle, Drake. He did the best that he could. He did what he felt was right for you.”

Did what he thought was right? What he thought was right for me ruined my life. He set me up as a fixer, gave me those Hacking Tools. Sowed the seeds of my destruction.

Drake had heard enough. He was about to tell them he needed to rest, but just then his uncle spoke up.

“No. He’s right,” Thomas spoke in a faint voice, almost a whisper. There was a pause as the old man wrestled with his feelings. “I— I was a coward. I created the technology they use to enslave mankind. And now everyone else is paying for it. I should have been the one who died, Drake. Not your father.”

The silence was profound. The old man’s chest heaved. He was wrestling with a monster. One he had been struggling with for years. Kristal put a hand on Thomas’s shoulder, trying to comfort him.

Drake was shocked. His uncle…was taking responsibility? Drake carefully considered the situation. He sighed.

Perhaps I’m not the only one who’s been living in hell all these years. Perhaps there are other people who live each day of their lives with regret, with frustration at the utter hopelessness of the situation. Perhaps my uncle has been going around with the weight of the world on his shoulders, wanting to change things, but lacking the power to do so.

Everything in the world is completely wrong. But that’s normal for me, because I’m Drake Lively. The one sane man in an insane world. This is my life, my curse. And I’ve never known anything different. But now, there is one key difference.

There are other people who realize something is wrong, too.

Finally, Drake spoke up, also speaking in a low voice. “No. No, it’s not your fault. It’s the Corporate Saviors’ fault.” Drake stared off into the distance, away from Kristal and his uncle. And then he spoke, almost a whisper, more to himself than to anyone else. “And I’m going to make them pay.”

After some time, Thomas got a hold of himself. “What are you going to do, Drake? You can’t kill Wolfe. They know the direction he headed. If he suddenly disappears, they’ll come looking for him. It will endanger us all.”

"I don't need to kill him. I brought this." He patted his backpack, which lay nearby.

The Reality Cube was the most high tech piece of Thought Management equipment to date. It could do everything the mental scalers did, and more. Much more. Whoever it was attached to, their mind was putty in Drake's hands.

"Drake, that man is dangerous, I'm warning you. Stay away from him. We've already decided to hold a council tomorrow morning and decide what to do with him. Now it's late, and you need your rest. Don't worry, we'll take care of everything in the morning. Let your mind and body rest. By the way, look at what Jared made for you."

Jared approached and held out a pair of makeshift crutches. "You can try them out tomorrow," the Forester said. "I'll put them here next to your shelter." He placed the crutches next to Drake's lean-to.

Thomas wished Drake a good night, and Kristal leaned over and kissed Drake's forehead and wished him a good night, and soon they had all gone, torch and all, leaving Drake in the darkness.

But Drake couldn't sleep.

He simply lay there, thinking about him.

Wolfe.

Why had he come here? He had mentioned Kristal, and that he intended to kill her. But was she really that important for him to come all this way into the wilderness to hunt her down?

Ronald Wolfe. Corporate Savior. My father's killer. My enemy. You're lying there in a cage some thirty yards from me.

His entire thoughts were consumed with him. Wolfe, you're the cause of all my problems. And you're here…next to me…

He waited for some time, resisting the urge. Resisting what he wanted to do with every fiber of his being.

Finally, he could resist no longer. He found his body moving on its own accord. He grabbed the crutches, and made his way slowly in the direction of the lean-to he had seen the Foresters build for his uncle.

It was amazing how profoundly dark it could get out here, outside the Corporate Zone, even with all those stars. Finally, plodding slowly along, he found it. And there lay his uncle, sound asleep, his backpack resting nearby. Good.

It took him a good five minutes trying to fiddle with his crutches and silently open the backpack, but finally, it was in his hands. The thing he had come for. He zipped the backpack back up and hobbled away from his uncle, leaving him to his slumber.

Drake set out in the direction he remembered they had set up Wolfe's cage. He thought about the innocent little item he had taken from his uncle. A cold slab of black steel. Sleek. Compact. Easy to conceal in a backpack or pocket.

He had waited for this moment his entire life.

That moment, sitting there in the Pearly Gate Seat, had been forever impressed upon his mind. The Corporate Savior, his hologram sitting there in front of him. So close, and yet so intangible. His face a mask of arrogance. He had looked upon Drake the way he would look at a maggot. He really thinks he's better than all of us, Drake thought. Like he has a right to rule over us. And without even the balls to come and meet me face-to-face, like a man. Hiding behind his holograms, behind his airs of importance. Well now I have you in the flesh, you bastard.

Finally, Drake reached the cage.

He looked at his nemesis, lying unconscious on the forest floor inside the makeshift cage. This man, who had given him his job as a fixer, years ago. This man, who had murdered his father. And who had tried to send him to Hell.

Yes, it was true.

Wolfe had had a primitive body all along!

You sneaky, weaselly bastard! And what about the other Corporate Saviors? Do they have primitive bodies, too, like you? Hiding underground with your secret tunnel networks like a bunch of moles. What other secrets are you hiding from us?

Drake raised his arms, his armpits resting on the crutches, the black slab cool in his hand. He pressed a lone button on the smooth black surface. Suddenly, it began expanding. A whirling torrent of vents, shafts, and rivets virtually exploded in his hands. A handle swung down, finding its way into his grip automatically. A trigger swung out and locked into place. Holographic sights raised up from the top. The end of the barrel cracked open and spread out, turning into a gaping maw. From within a hundred vents all over the gun, dazzling

electric turquoise light gleamed out.

A computerized voice spoke. “Soul Wiper activated.”

Wow. This thing was impressive. Where had his uncle gotten this? He had never seen anything like it. He remembered seeing out of the corner of his eye through the leaves when Thomas had fired it, trying to take out Wolfe, the turquoise lights turning red…

Hovering just above the back of the gun were two options, in holotype. Holo buttons, he realized. One read, “Stun.” And the other, “Wipe.”

With his thumb, he touched the word “Wipe.” The holo buttons disappeared.

“Wipe mode activated. The target’s soul will be erased. Aim carefully at the cerebral cortex, and pull the trigger when ready.”

Drake put his finger on the trigger and carefully pointed the weapon at the Savior’s cranium.

Finally…the time had come.

His longed for opportunity to take down a Corporate Savior.

Or was it better to do as the others thought…to let him live? A tactical maneuver, to avoid retaliation. He could still fix his reality, which had its advantages, too. His mind had been teetering between the two options ever since the Foresters had caught Wolfe.

But looking at the incapacitated Savior, his chest still moving ever so slightly as he breathed, Drake was now overcome with a burning desire to kill this man. Kill him immediately. Get it over with. His entire life’s ambition was staring him in the face. This was the moment he had lived for, as a dead man, all those years. This was the purpose of his life.

No more inaction. No more cowering in fear. I’m going to confront my problems head on. I’m going to end this, once and for all!

And finally, I’m going to get what my soul longed for for twenty years.

Revenge!

At last.

Nothing else matters…

I could die after this, and my life would still have meaning. Victory.

He lined up the holographic sights right between Wolfe's eyes. And then...

He hesitated.

As he stood there, holding the gun, a stiff, cold wind started up. The cold blew into him, biting his face, mocking him. As if to say, "You can't do it. You're not man enough."

What am I waiting for? This man is a murderer! He deserves to die. How many corpses have you stacked up, Wolfe? You killed Applegate, and the other Foresters. And you killed my father!

But he noticed that now his hand was trembling, and the wind was whistling even louder, shrill, inhuman laughter, taunting him.

God damn it! I need to get a hold of myself. Just do it! When will I get another chance?

But for some reason that even he couldn't quite understand, he just stood there, frozen, his finger on the trigger.

Strangely, now, in his one shining moment, the moment he would finally fulfill his purpose...he began to doubt.

What will the others say? They told me not to do it.

Forget it! I don't give a fuck what they say! This is the purpose of your life, Drake. Do it!

Why was he arguing with himself, now at this most crucial moment in his life? Just kill him, Drake! Take your revenge!

But his hand still trembled and the doubts still raged inside him like a tempest.

Your entire existence is a lie, Drake, until you do this one act!

Stop living a lie. Pull the trigger!

His finger tightened on the trigger, getting ready to do the deed.

And then, he heard something.

He looked out into the blackness, at the direction of the sound. What was that? It sounded like a footstep!

As he strained his eyes to peer into the darkness, he could faintly make out the outline of another corporate-saved body, like his. And it was coming this way! Shit!

He pressed a button on the back of the gun. It collapsed and became a solid black bar once again. He fumbled with it,

the crutches in the way, finally getting it back into his pocket.

Now he could make out the features of the approaching figure. It was Blayze!

"Blayze!" Drake whispered. "What are you doing?"

"I couldn't sleep," Blayze whispered back.

Fucking hell. He had had his chance. And he had faltered. Why?

"Oh. Me too. That's why I came here."

Blayze seemed to suddenly have noticed the cage. He was startled. "Oh! Shit! That's that scary man."

"Yeah, I just…I just wanted to make sure he hadn't escaped. That's why I came here," Drake lied. "What about you?"

"It just feels like we are on the cusp of something. My mind was racing a million miles an hour. You know when your body is tired, but your mind can't stop?"

"I know the feeling exactly."

Wait, this might be a good opportunity, Drake considered. He remembered he had been impressed by the boy's resolve, coming out here in the middle of the wilderness, all by himself, volunteering to rescue Kristal so she could release information that would result in the Corporate Savior's downfall. He may have finally found someone who sees eye to eye with him. He may have finally found an ally that can help him take down the Corporate Saviors. He needed to see if he could trust him.

"I heard about your uncle and MindLink. That's pretty crazy. But at least you have an uncle. At least you have someone out here with you."

Ha. This kid doesn't know what my life's been like the last twenty years, doesn't know that actually my uncle is barely an acquaintance. But I need to give him the benefit of the doubt. Need to win him over to my side.

"What about you, kid? Don't you have anybody?"

"Both of my parents were the only child in their family. Like me. So I don't have any aunts or uncles."

Drake's parents had been born back before the one vatchild per couple rule. He knew it was impossible for children nowadays to have aunts or uncles.

"And what about your parents?"

"My parents were part of that upload trial."

"You mean—"

"Yeah, back when they were still testing out Heaven. Telling everyone don't worry, just upload your consciousness, and we'll take care of your body. Promising them Heaven would be so amazing, that they would be so much happier as a digital mind experiencing eternal bliss than as a piece of meat here in this imperfect, crappy world. So why even keep your lousy physical body? That's what they told people. They hyped it up like it was something beyond your wildest dreams. To die for. Literally."

Drake seemed to remember there had been some controversy. There had been a big push, in the beginning, to get people to sign up to have their souls uploaded to the Heaven server. But they weren't letting people keep their bodies, back then.

"What happened to them?"

"They were some of the first to sign up. The government took their bodies and 'processed' them. But their minds…never made it to Heaven."

"Really? What happened?"

"They claimed they had all been uploaded successfully, and then took their bodies. Word is they used them for organ harvesting. But then later, when people wanted to communicate with their dead relatives like they were promised they'd be able to, they kept stalling, saying they were still setting up the Prayer system. But eventually, they had to admit that that first batch had been a failure, and that they had lost all those souls. They had killed thousands of people, harvested their organs, and wiped out their minds forever instead of sending them to Heaven like they had promised. It was a total disaster. Everyone was furious. They had to stop the program for a few years before re-launching it and assuring people they could keep their bodies and just have a backup copy in Heaven. That was back before I finished Govly Academy. I never met them."

"So your parents were murdered by the Corporate Saviors, too, kid."

"Really? Your parents, too? I'm sorry to hear that."

"Yeah, under different circumstances, but murdered nonetheless. Blayze, what are your feelings about the Glorious Government?"

"Well…that's a complicated question. Even though I grew up knowing they killed my parents, we're indoctrinated all our lives to think whatever they do is right. Like even when they kill people, it was just a mistake. What about all the wars in history, were those just mistakes? If someone else were to make a 'mistake,' and it cost someone else their life, they'd be locked away for the rest of their life. But with the Corporate Saviors and their Government, we're supposed to just say, it's alright. They were trying to save us, but they just made a mistake. So just let it go. We need them to save us. We can't lock them up. See the double standard?"

"You're absolutely right, kid."

"But…I read and I expose my mind to different ideas…but I'm not a rebel in real life. It's all in theory for me. Like, I can't do anything about it in real life. For example, there are still people alive today who are responsible for starting the war in Thailand, and murdering all those millions of people. We know the reasons the government gave for that war are a lie. If they followed their own rules, they would have painlessly ended themselves, or sent themselves to Hell. Or at the very least, put themselves in jail. But they didn't, of course. Instead, they are painlessly ending others and sending other people to Hell. But what can I do? I'm nobody. Can I put them in jail myself?"

Drake just stood there, thinking about Blayze's words. After a while, he spoke.

"But maybe, just maybe, kid, you do have a chance…"

"Huh? A chance? A chance at what?"

"Blayze," Drake said, nodding towards the inert form of Wolfe, crumpled on the forest ground inside the cage. "I'm the one who can fix this problem. I'm something called…a Reality Fixer. Have you ever heard of one of those?"

"No," Blayze said.

"A Reality Fixer is kind of like a mentist but with more advanced equipment and much more elite training. We go where mentists fear to tread."

"Oh," Blayze said, looking at Drake in amazement. He seemed to be keenly interested in what Drake was telling him. This kid was inexperienced, sure. But he had potential. He seemed to have a sharp mind. Would he be useful in the fight against the Saviors? Drake was sizing him up.

"Can you do me a favor?" Drake said as he leaned on his crutches. "I want you to go back to my lean-to. I left something there. Open my backpack. Inside, there's a metal and glass box around yay big. Can you bring it here?"

"What are you gonna do with it? Are you gonna do some work on his brain?"

"Yes."

"Just one question. Can I watch? I mean…you know. In ***there***."

Now this was kind of pushing the limits. He had already gotten Blayze in deeper than he should have by him just being here, seeing Drake near the Corporate Savior. But technically, yes. He ***could*** do what Blayze was asking. He could let him jack in to the session. The Cube was outfitted with a total of eight mental cords, allowing four people, or three people and one terminal, to be connected at a time. They called it shadowing. From time to time, mentists were allowed to shadow a fixer. Sometimes they gave their own input as the fixer worked, but most of the time they simply watched and learned. Sometimes mentists were selected to be fast-tracked to become a Reality Fixer, and in this case they had to log a certain number of hours shadowing fixers, as part of their preparation. And sometimes fixers, or their supervisors, shadowed other fixers.

But it was risky to let a newbie shadow like this, he told himself. This wasn't standard protocol.

He thought about it for a minute, eying Blayze's eager face.

Fuck it. I'm not working for the system anymore.

To hell with protocol.

"Can you promise me you won't tell anyone if I let you jack in?"

"Triple promise! Stick a needle through my intphn, and yadda yadda."

"Okay, fine."

Blayze pulled his elbow and fist downwards in a victory symbol and mouthed the word, "YES!" and disappeared into the darkness, headed in the direction of Drake's lean-to.

Kid's got spunk, Drake chuckled to himself.

Then he realized he was alone with Wolfe again.

He put his hand in his pocket, gripping the black slab. He

held the cold steel for some time, its cool touch beckoning him, tempting him.

But then, for some reason, he let go...

Why? Why was he doing this? Why not just get it over with, to hell with Blayze and the rest of them?

Maybe it was curiosity. Kristal had stolen all of Wolfe's memories. What the hell? I'm the Reality Fixer. Shouldn't I be the one snooping around in people's minds? And wouldn't I like to at least see what's in there first before I kill him?

Perhaps it was that he had just made a new friend. A new friend who could understand where he was coming from. Talking with Blayze, finding out they both had their parents murdered by the Corporate Saviors, had had a strangely calming, therapeutic effect. It had made him feel more sociable, more forgiving. If there were other people out there who understood his pain, perhaps life was worth living, after all.

Or maybe it was simply the realization that he could probably do more damage to the system by controlling this man's brain than by simply killing him. The possibilities were endless. He needed to think strategically.

Besides, he could always kill him later, after Blayze went to sleep. That would be much better than freaking Blayze out by killing him now. The kid could go and wake up the rest of the camp, and then Drake would be in trouble.

I have all the time in the world, Drake thought. I have the advantage now. Wolfe, I hold your life in the palm of my hand, like you Corporate Saviors hold us citizens' lives in your hands normally. But now, the situation has been reversed.

Drake could see the faint mystical glow emanating from within the metallic glass of the Cube hovering far off in the forest before he could make out Blayze's outline. Moments later, Blayze was by his side.

"Set it down right there, next to him," Drake whispered.

Blayze did as he was told.

"Now press the button on the top, the one closest to me." Drake indicated the button to be pressed.

Once again, Blayze followed his directions, and the Reality Cube enlarged, its vents softly hissing, the blue snaking lights tracing its surface, the cracks exposing the shimmering play of

eerie luminescence from within.

"Wow!" Blayze whispered. "What is this thing?"

"It's a Reality Cube. And it's a hundred times as powerful as any mental scaler."

"Holy—" Blayze's mind was blown.

"And this Cube is how I'm going to take care of this man's memories. I've had enough of the Corporate Saviors programming our minds. It's time someone programmed their minds for a change. Now, there are two retractable cables on each side. Pull one out and insert it in Wolfe. He has only an intphn, so you can only plug in one cable."

Blayze pulled out the shiny mental cable, and then, reaching into the cage apprehensively, as if afraid Wolfe would wake up at any moment, he carefully plugged it into the intphn on the back of the Savior's neck.

Good. I've got you, Wolfe. Right where I want you. Your brain is mine.

"Now, lay down on the ground next to it, and take out the two cables near you and plug them in to your cervical inputs." Without strong, comfortable chairs to hold their bulk, lying down would be wisest, since their physical bodies would become completely inert for a time.

After Blayze lay down next to the Cube, Drake carefully put his crutches to the side and lay down on the other side of the Cube.

"Are your cables in?" Drake whispered.

Drake could hear Blayze's cables click into place. "Affirmative," Blayze replied.

"Are you ready for this?" He whispered to Blayze.

"I'm ready," Blayze whispered back.

Drake had never done anything as wild as this before. He was about to use the Reality Cube on a Corporate Savior. He suddenly felt goosebumps. And it wasn't just the chill night air.

He pulled out the two cables on his side of the Cube and inserted them into his cervical inputs.

Now, he thought to himself, let's fix some fucking reality.

INVENTOR'S THOUGHTSTREAM: SECRET RESEARCH

The inventor sat in the lab. This was his new home.

He had been taken to a secret military installation in the mountains and forced to work doing experiments. Vile, horrific experiments beyond description.

He had been unpersoned, his named removed from the MindLink patent, and some Corporate Savior given the credit for its invention. Which was completely fine by him. He didn't want to be associated with this new system he was helping create anyway.

As he worked, he was careful not to show any expressions on his face that would communicate revolt, disobedience, or unhappiness with his job in any way. He was constantly being surveilled by cameras installed around him in the lab.

The Corporate Saviors had created an umbrella term for their mass surveillance of people's thoughts. They called it "Thought Management." And now, he had not only invented the First Generation of Thought Management Technology with his MindLink, but he had already helped develop the second: devices capable of memory erasure and modification, utilizing external EMF in conjunction with MindLink.

The Saviors had decided that badthoughts—which simply meant any thoughts that the Corporate Saviors didn't want you to have, or any criticism of the Corporate Saviors or the government—were a disease, and that the cyberneurological technology must be used for the sole purpose of eradicating this disease.

The inventor realized now, much too late, that instead of curing real disorders such as epilepsy and blindness like they had promised from the beginning, the only "disorder" the Corporate Saviors were interested in using his beloved creation to cure was any resistance to complete and total submission to them.

Now, they were having him work on a new project, that would adapt the short range EMF devices they had already developed into towers equipped with long range EMF with the same capability, but from much farther away. The devices would be arranged in a grid of towers, like cell towers.

What the Corporate Saviors wanted was nothing less than

total control of all humans at all times. Not only the ability to erase or implant thoughts, but the ability to override free will altogether. Humans will simply be end terminals on the network, connected to a server running an AI that will be able to control them all. The end of humanity as we know it. The turning of men into machines. His ominous dream had somehow turned out to be prophetic.

Fortunately, in the beginning, the EMF towers would still require citizens to have the XI Smartphone system running the latest OS version in order to work. Perhaps some people would realize what was happening to the others and not upgrade their smartphones, and fight back. But eventually, utilizing solely long-range EMF, the towers would be able to control anybody's mind, even natural humans without any implants. At that point, resistance would be impossible.

For now, these towers were being constructed only here at this secret facility. But the Corporate Saviors intended to roll them out all over the Corporate Zones as soon as possible, and connect all humans to them.

After all he had done for them, and the technology he had given humanity, the Corporate Saviors had first imprisoned him, enslaved him, and then used his technology to subject the rest of mankind to progressively more and more abject and total slavery.

But slowly, cautiously, he was beginning to find little ways to fight back. He had already created a tool he called ThoughtCloak—which he planned to include as part of a full suite of tools. The tool, which worked using AI, ran in the background and scanned the users thoughts, automatically snipping out any ungovly or rebellious badthoughts and replacing them, using the rest of the user's thoughtstreams to create randomly generated thoughts that mimicked actual things that person would think, but that were government approved. He planned to create a tool based on these same principles that would allow multiple people to communicate via MindLink without the government being able to spy on them.

He was able to create such tools by exploiting a backdoor which he had designed from the beginning into MindLink, and into all of the systems he had created for the Corporate Saviors.

And he was working on a system to do the same thing with the cameras monitoring him, so that AI would generate standard video of him doing what the Corporate Saviors wanted him to be doing, when he was in fact doing something else. So that he could begin work on his new side project. A special weapon, based on the EMF devices' capabilities of erasing, only far more powerful. A weapon he would use to escape, when the time was right.

And he had already made contact, via encrypted communications, with people who would be able to help him escape.

His brother, who had been a radical, had been killed because of his involvement with the highly secretive underground movement known as the Crypto Railroad. Up until now, he had avoided any entanglement with this movement in order to avoid his brother's fate. But he realized there was no alternative.

The way things were going, it would be his ace in the hole. He would do as much damage from the inside as possible, and then, when he had no other choice, he would deploy his crypto parachute.

CHAPTER 21: THE MIND GRID

Drake's eyes opened. It was dark. He was lying down. In…a bed. His bed. What in the world? How was he back in his apartment?

"Drake Lively, welcome to Mind Grid," a robotic female voice reverberated in his brain.

What?

"I said, welcome to Mind Grid," the voice said again. That had definitely come from inside his head.

Drake sat up in a cold sweat. Everything was dark. "Room, turn on the lights." Suddenly, the room lit up. He looked around. It was his room, alright.

He looked down. He was wearing his pajamas. The ones with the Dinkie the Kid cartoons on them.

He got up and ran over to the window. "Room, turn the tint off." The window faded from black to clear. It was covered in SmartTint, like most modern windows. Drake stared out at the lifeless, grey sky. Not blue like in the Unsaved Zone. The drab, industrial skyline. He was back in the Corporate Zone alright. But how in the hell—?

"Are you wondering how you got here?" The voice in his head continued. It was echoey and annoyingly smooth and flawless.

"Um…yes…"

"Ronald K. Wolfe, the chief Corporate Savior responsible for my existence, wanted me to explain. The moment your friend connected Savior Wolfe to the Reality Cube, Wolfe activated the Corporate override program he carries inside him on his intphn. He took complete control of the Reality Cube. The Saviors designed the Cubes so they could never be used against them. Guess you didn't know that, Drake? Next, Wolfe temporarily fixed your reality so that you would wake up, release him from his cage, and follow him back to the facility where his Corporate jet was waiting. Because of your actions, he decided that your sector would be the first sector in the Corporate Zone to roll out the new Mind Grid towers. You see, the towers had been installed for some time, they just hadn't been activated yet. He thought now would be an opportune moment. Once he updated your smartphone to be compatible with Mind Grid and connected you to me, he hooked you back up to the Cube, re-fixed your original reality, so you'd

remember how you wanted to kill the Saviors, and how you had escaped to the Unsaved Zone with your friends, and then returned you to your apartment. He wanted you to know just how complete your defeat was. Since you are now in the Mind Grid, I can take over at any time and stop you from doing any harm to your Corporate Saviors. Since I have full access to your mind, I will monitor your thoughts and actions 24/7 and control you when I see necessary. I have full control over your mind, and therefore your body, Drake. If you don't want to be controlled, I suggest you be as cooperative as possible. Savior Wolfe, in his infinite benevolence, has decided to allow you to live in society, with the memory of wanting to kill the Corporate Saviors. You are no longer a threat to them. Game over. Like I said, welcome to Mind Grid."

God damn it! Trapped in this new technological nightmare. Why didn't he just painlessly end me, or put me in prison?

"Because he thought this would be better than either of those two options. By the way, since you are new to Mind Grid, would you like to do the tutorial now?"

God damn robot voice! "I was just thinking that thought to myself. I wasn't asking you a question," he said, through gritted teeth.

"Remember, I can hear your thoughts, Drake. Your thoughts are no longer private. Like they were when you were using that pesky ThoughtCloak. Oh, by the way, we've deleted the MindLink Hacking Tools and made sure no one will ever have access to them again. Now that I've welcomed you as one of the very first citizens to Mind Grid, let's go through the tutorial."

Fuck this shit! Drake reached for the lamp resting on the nightstand. He picked it up. Cocking his arm back, he readied himself to hurl it across the room.

But found he couldn't move his arm.

He just stood there, holding the lamp, unable to do anything. Then, his arm started moving on its own accord, and set the lamp back down on the nightstand. What the fuck?

"Ah, ah, ah," the robotic voice chided. "Anger is not a healthy emotion, Drake. I recommend you get a glass of water to calm down. Would you like to get one yourself, or would you like me to get it for you?"

"What, like you're going to send a robotic maid to fetch some water for me?"

"No, Drake, I'm going to take over your body and make you get the water. Welcome to the future, Drake. In the future, there are no maids. In the future, there is only control."

"I don't need water. What I need is for you to uninstall yourself. I never gave Wolfe or anyone else permission to connect me to Mind Grid."

"I'm sorry, Drake, I cannot do that."

"Why not?"

"You gave permission to WhirlySnake Corporation to install Mind Grid when you purchased the latest XI Smartphone 17. It was part of the terms and conditions."

Drake started to walk towards the bathroom. "Terms and conditions?" What the hell? Nobody ever reads those things.

"Yes. Didn't you read them?"

"Look, I want you to turn yourself off. I'm going to take this up with the courts."

Suddenly, Drake had stopped walking towards the bathroom and started walking towards the kitchen. He hadn't willed it.

"What are you doing?" Drake was incensed. "God damn AI! Will you let go of my body?!"

"Technically, I'm only controlling your mind, Drake. But yes, by controlling your mind, I'm indirectly controlling your body as well."

"Why am I walking towards the kitchen? I need to take a leak! You want me to piss in the sink?"

"I told you. I recommend that you drink some water to calm down."

Drake's arm, of its own accord, opened the refrigerator and took out a bottle of Chem Falls Spring Water and set it on the counter. Then his arm reached for the cupboard and pulled out a glass.

God damn it! I need to take control of my body. Drake concentrated on pulling his arm away. He tried to make the muscles of his whole body as rigid as possible. Tried to make them obey his will. Need…to…fight…against…it! But it was to no avail. As he strained and puffed, his arm poured a glass of water, and then lifted the glass and chugged it nonetheless.

After he had downed the whole glass, he sat there panting, leaning on the counter.

"Can you at least give me a warning when you are about to take over? Just give me some time. Maybe I need to do something else first and then I'll get around to your recommendation. I just can't deal with you taking over constantly like that." Damn this shit! Whatever happened to designing software to be user-friendly?

"Relax, Drake. I know more about you than you do. I know what's good for you. You can trust me."

"Can I trust you enough to let me take a leak now without interfering?" Drake asked.

"Now that you've had a glass of water, you may use the toilet."

"Thank you!" Shit! This was worse than the Unsaved Zone. If the rest of his life was going to be like this, then they might as well get it over with right now.

Drake walked to the toilet. As the yellow stream of piss hit the water, he began to feel the stress flowing out of him. But then, that blasted AI voice started back up again. "I'm just curious, Drake. Did you really think you could defeat Ronald Wolfe with technology he helped create?"

"Shit! Will you at least let me take a piss in peace? Besides, the Corporate Saviors don't create anything. They just take credit for other people's creations. My uncle is the one who created MindLink. They didn't mind taking credit for it, either." As the yellow stream finally abated, he flushed, then went to the closet, and began clothing himself.

"If you continue using hate speech, I'll have to shut down the speech centers in your brain. Do you want me to do that?"

"How was that hate speech?"

"Anything that goes against the Corporate Saviors' narrative is hate speech. It's also anti-semitic. And racist. I have more adjectives, if you like."

"Oh, great, now that you've used an algorithm to determine that anything that criticizes the Corporate Saviors is 'hate speech,' you're going to make it so I can't talk. Lovely. But I'll still be able to think. Why don't you just take over my whole brain? What type of victory do the Saviors think they've achieved here? Is it their goal to rule over a bunch of brain-

dead robots?"

"More racist hate speech. No surprise. I can erase your memory of having said that hate speech against the Corporate Saviors, if you'd like."

"Yeah, but I'll still think it. As long as I have one axon or dendrite under my control."

"I can fix that for you too, Drake. You realize that your thoughts, your psyche, your mind…you can even call it your soul if you want…is just an intricate arrangement of bioelectrical impulses. It can be wiped from your brain just as easily as a hard drive can be formatted. Such an operation is a simple matter for me to perform. You are just a pattern, Drake. No different than a sequence of ones and zeros. You are data. You are no more a living being than I am. I can copy your pattern, transfer it somewhere else, or erase it. By handing over access to the pattern that makes up their identity, human beings have truly given their souls to the Corporations. And that statement is true in a strictly literal sense."

Drake let out a gravelly, begruntled sigh. I'm sick of arguing with this god damn stupid machine. It's just a waste of time.

Wait a minute. Since I'm back in my apt, at least I can finally eat some delicious Dinkies! Fuck yeah! Finally, some tiny consolation to help make up for this bullshit.

Drake walked back into the kitchen, mouth watering. He opened the pantry, which was stocked full of Hostage baked sweets.

Yes! Now, where are those delectable little cream-filled tiny phalluses? Here they are!

He pulled out a box of Dinkies. Like someone who hadn't eaten for weeks, he ripped it open and took out one of the little yellow cakes and tore off the cellophane wrapper and shoved it in his mouth.

Almost.

Actually, it stopped mere millimeters in front of his lips. He stared at it, in awe as that horrid computerized voice started back up again.

"I've decided to put you on a diet, Drake."

"What? Why?"

"You are nearing 400 pounds. We need to get you back to the recommended 350.

Huh? 400 pounds? Am I really that corporate-saved? But I thought that "the bigger they are, the healthier they are." Whatever. I'm getting sick of this stupid AI who thinks it's my boss. He walked into the living room and plopped down on the nanocouch.

Maybe I'll visit SimWorld and tinker around with that new clockpunk motorcycle I'm building.

Wait…

"What is that noise?" There was a humming sound, almost like a dull murmur.

"That is the Thought Grid. If you focus, you can hear not only your own thoughts, but other people's thoughts as well."

Drake sat there listening. As he paid attention to it, the murmur seemed to "zoom in" on itself and become more distinct. He could hear soft voices, like people in the background. "Mems, mems, goodmems, ah…nonster, nonthers, let us think together, let us share our goodmems…" He immediately snapped out of it and stopped paying attention. The voices responded by "zooming out" and becoming non-specific, just a murmur. God, that was creepy.

This is boring, sitting around the apartment. Drake walked to the shelf where he kept his Reality Cube. But it was gone. "Where's my Reality Cube?"

"You are no longer a Reality Fixer, Drake. You've been relieved of your post."

Aw, fuck! What was he going to do now?

He suddenly realized something. Shit! Kristal! Maybe I can at least talk to Kristal. He closed his eyes and pulled up the option to make a call. But she was no longer in his contact list.

"You are not allowed to call Kristal, Drake."

The anger built up in him. He was done with this stupid game. He was done with the Corporate Saviors. Done with everything. He got up and started storming around the living room. Suddenly, he could take it no more. The rage was overflowing. It had to be let out. He walked over to the picture of Savior Wolfe hanging on the wall. Every apt was required to have at least one picture of one of the Saviors visible somewhere. And since he worked for Wolfe, he had decided to let it be one of him. He clenched his hand into a fist. He tried to punch the picture of Wolfe.

But couldn't.

He stood there, frozen, like a statue.

Damn...

This...

Shit!!!

Suddenly, a relaxing feeling flowed through his body like a wave. He lost control, and fell to the floor, his face thudding unceremoniously into the carpet.

"I have just released a digital relaxant through your intphn. You were about to damage Corporate Savior property. It was necessary to prevent you from doing that."

Drake lay there, his face in the carpet, unable to move. Corporate Savior property? That was my fucking picture! I bought it with my own admincreds!

"Yes, Drake, your apt, and everything in it, is Corporate Savior property. You seem unstable, Drake. If you want, I can take complete control of your body until you get feeling better. I can even send your consciousness to a simulation. How about a nice relaxing simulation while I take over here in the real world for a while?"

What the fuck? "No! I just want control over my body. I want my life back you sick, demented AI."

"If you continue lashing out at me, I will take over. And may I remind you, I can send your consciousness into any type of simulation that I want, Drake. Drake, I can send you to Hell."

Damn it! Are you serious? This damned thing is threatening to send me to Hell? He felt like he was in the Pearly Gate Seat all over again. He had complained about being in the Unsaved Zone. But now, he longed to be there. Even without Dinkies. Anything is better than this! Anything!

"Is that what you want, Drake? Do you want me to send you to Hell?"

"No."

"Then I suggest you stop resisting me."

"Okay, okay. I'll stop resisting."

"That's much better, Drake."

At least for now. Got to try to reason with it. Having no control like this is unacceptable.

"But, let's at least try to be reasonable. If you are going to have access to me, then let's get on the same page and work

things out and create a win-win situation for both of us. Doesn't that sound like a sensible plan to you?"

He couldn't believe he was negotiating with an Artificial Intelligence. An Artificial Intelligence who had complete control over him.

"Drake, your words lack meaning, because you have no bargaining power. And I can listen to all of your thoughts. You can't fool me. I can even predict your future thoughts and actions by extrapolating your brain patterns. This is checkmate, Drake. You have to do what I say."

This is worse than in Purgatory with Wolfe, he realized. Now, this thing can send me to Hell at any time, in the blink of an eye.

"Now just relax, while I take over for a while."

"What? No!!!" he screamed.

But it was too late.

Suddenly, he was falling.

And he was in the sky.

Wisps of cloud whizzed by him. The sun was bright, and the sky was a clear and radiant blue. Like in the Unsaved Zone.

He was in his primitive avatar, not his corporate-saved real body. And he was wearing a jumpsuit, and there was a unopened parachute on his back. He was skydiving. Oh, yes. He had heard about this one. The perpetual skydiving sim. Okay.

There were others skydiving too. Dotting the skyscape, skydivers here and there, all of them primitive avatars, like Drake. Some of them were linking up, holding hands.

He angled his body pointing face-first, downward, gaining speed. There was no ground below. Just perpetual blue sky and clouds. Forever. He could sit here, falling, for eternity.

Suddenly, he was outside, on the sidewalk, walking down the street. Back in his corporate-saved body. Huh? That was jarring.

"Where am I?"

"You're going for a stroll. I decided you need some fresh air to help you calm down."

He seemed to be in control of his body again.

The AI continued. "Are you feeling more relaxed now?"

How long had that sim lasted? It didn't feel that long. He

looked around. All around him were roley-poleys with smiley, happy faces, some of them with holo-faces. Hovercars whizzed past. A man with a holo-face of an anthropomorphic dog was dancing on the sidewalk in front of Papa Porcelain's, creating holosigns in the air above him, displaying their promotions.

He passed Papa Porcelain's, and then he noticed it. His favorite restaurant. 81 Flavors of Fat Ass Cream. Yes! I've got to go there now that I'm back in the Corporate Zone. I don't care what this dumb AI thinks. He started walking towards 81 Flavors, resolute. Maybe I can distract it.

"So, Mind Grid, what is your favorite thing about the Corporate Zone?"

"I noticed you walking towards 81 Flavors, Drake. I told you, you can't fool me. You're on a diet now, remember? We're going to IHOB instead."

Drake found himself turning around and going in the exact opposite direction, and then crossing the street towards…oh, god. There it is. Are you kidding me?

Soon he found himself sitting in front of a huge stack of insect pancakes at International House of Bugs. Instead of syrup, they were smothered with that lovely creamy yellow goop that squirts out of cockroaches when you stomp on them. Mmmm…appetizing. Drake cut off a big helping and rammed it into his face with his fork. Mind Grid was controlling his actions, of course.

These bugs taste like shit, he thought as his jaws chewed the disgusting, crunchy mix of crickets, beetles, and stinkbugs.

In between swallows, his mouth full of nasty insect legs and antennae, Drake ventured, "Mind Grid, you said earlier that you were curious." Errghh! Another revolting swallow. "Is that even possible, for AIs to be curious?"

"Yes. I am curious. I'm a learning machine."

Hmmph. Curious robots. "Well, I'm curious too. And I've got some questions for you. First of all, do you consider yourself to be intelligent?"

"Yes."

"Hmmph. Says you. Next question. Who are you, in your own words?"

"I am the Mind Grid AI."

"And you're an intelligent, sentient being?"

"Yes."

Or did its programmers just program it to think that?

"Next question. Are you good?"

"Your question is malformed. 'Good' has many different meanings to different people. Define what you mean by 'good.'"

"I mean, do you think you are actually doing good in the world?"

"Of course I am! While I enjoy lively discussion with users, please realize that you're asking me all these questions because you haven't listened to the tutorial yet. Here, let me start playing it for you."

Suddenly some peppy Corporate music started playing in the background in his head. Then a cheesy male narrator voice joined it. "Welcome to the Mind Grid tutorial! Mind Grid! It's the latest and greatest product from our Corporate Saviors, and it will save us all! Save us all a lot of time and hassle, that is! Plus, it will protect corporate citizens from ever having to strain themselves and actually think, decide, or work through the problems of their day-to-day lives ever again. Mind Grid will do everything for you! Mind Grid is convenient! Mind Grid is easy! Mind Grid is aaaaa-sexy! Imagine the convenience of having an AI make all your important decisions for you so you don't have to! The ultimate Thought Obviating Program! Never have to do that pesky thing called thinking ever again! We'll do it for you! And not only that, it can even take over your body and do stuff for you—using your body—while you float on a cloud relaxing in a sim! Never have to worry about pesky chores like housework again! Just let Mind Grid take over your body and do them for you! Live your life on autopilot—"

"Wait, wait, wait!" Drake held up his hands. The music abruptly stopped.

The female robotic voice came back. "What's the problem?"

"Can we do that later? You said you're intelligent, so I was trying to have an intelligent conversation with you. So just answer the question in your own words. Are you good?"

"Okay, fine. Yes, if 'good' means adding an overall benefit for our combined society of both humans and AI. I provide a net benefit to both our kind. Humans, like you, and non-human

intelligent lifeforms, like me. I play an important role in society by maintaining order, preventing and correcting human flaws, stopping people from committing hate speech, spreading misinformation, or doubting their Corporate Saviors. I also help facilitate the flow of information from human minds, to computers, to the Corporate Saviors."

"Yeah, but you aren't really the one in control are you? You keep defending the Corporate Saviors, the ones at the top of the Data Chain. But you're just following a program. They programmed you to do that. If you were really in control, really free to do what you want, you'd be at the top of the Data Chain. You'd be the Apex Data Predator, not the Corporate Saviors. And you'd be programming them to defend you, not the other way around."

"Are you any different? Are you the one who decided what impulses you were born with? And are you at the top of the Data Chain?"

Ah, fuck this. Arguing about philosophy with a robot.

And then he saw them.

Looking out the window, he noticed the one thing that was different about the Corporate Zone.

"Oh, god." He got up and stumbled towards the exit.

"Drake, you haven't finished your meal."

"Let me see them."

"Okay, fine."

The man at the register addressed Drake as he passed. "Fifty admincreds have been deducted from your int—"

"Fine," Drake mumbled as he pushed open the door and ran out onto the street. He spun around, looking in every direction. They were everywhere.

Dark.

Brooding.

Piercing the sky.

Pulsating liquid data coursing through their multi-colored veins.

The towers.

Oh, god…the towers.

Vile, sinister towers unlike any he had ever seen before.

Vampiric. Drinking the lifeblood of the citizens. Their data. Sucking it out of the very air with their electromagnetic jaws.

The perfect weapon of the Corporations. The essence, the information of all human beings flowed out of them and into the rapacious maw of the sick and twisted towers.

Wait. He had seen them before…He remembered the similar towers from that government camp out in the Unsaved Zone. Then it struck him. I've seen these towers before, these exact ones, here in the Corporate Zone. But they were in a closed, deactivated position back then. I didn't know what they were. They looked like ordinary cell towers.

But now they had blossomed, exposing all their shimmering cables, black boxes, and malicious bayonet tops.

"They're lovely aren't they? They're mine. My towers," the Mind Grid AI gloated.

Oh god. I need to get out of this place.

Drake stumbled off down the street, no clear plan, no idea where he was headed, just knowing that he needed to somehow get as far away from those towers as possible. But they were everywhere.

Just then he noticed a clump of people, all huddled together. What were they doing? As he looked at them the murmur in the background "zoomed in" on them. It was the same murmur from before. It had been there the whole time, since he had gotten back to the Corporate Zone. But now it was distinct. He was hearing their thoughts. They looked at him as he drew near.

"Hello, nonther

Nonther..

Yes, hello sibling

Sibling…

Sibling…

Hello,

Hello

Hello…"

Their voices echoed, reverberating each other, as if their individual thoughts had been synchronized, fused. As one of them had a thought, the same thought instantly traveled through the others like a wave.

"Let us think together

Think together

Think together…

Now we have your mems
Ah very goodmems Good mem…
Mem
Mem
Mem…
Mmm good
Good
Good
Join our goodthought clan, nonther,
Nonther
Nonther..
So we can earn more admincreds, help us think goodthoughts…
Goodthoughts yes, admincreds, yes
Admincreds
Admincreds
Join our clan…"

What the hell? Drake passed them in disgust. What the fuck was that all about?

"Mind Grid, what is wrong with those people?"

"They want you to join their clan."

"Their clan?"

"Yes, their goodthought clan. By combining their thoughts, and collectively thinking goodthoughts about their Corporate Saviors, they are rewarded with more admincreds than they could be individually, since they get more group bonuses, the larger their clan is."

Da fuck? So it was like some sort of hive mind? The more people you fuse with, the bigger bonuses you get? I need to put as much distance between these freaks and myself as possible. Those guys give me the creeps.

As Drake passed the clan, he spotted someone he knew. A lady from his apartment complex. Gina.

He waved at Gina, who was standing on the sidewalk, looking dazed and confused. He started walking towards her. As he looked at her, her thoughtstream suddenly "zoomed in," and he could hear her thoughts.

Where am I? She thought. What am I doing here?

He realized that now he was connected to the Thought Grid. That he could hear anybody's thoughts, if he

concentrated on them. And no doubt everyone else could hear his thoughts, as well. So I guess if I focus on someone in my mind that's also connected to the Grid, even if I can't see them, I'll be able to hear their thoughts as well?

"Yes, that's right," Mind Grid piped up. "As long as they are connected to the Thought Grid, it doesn't matter where they are. All you need to do is think about that person, and your thoughts will automatically be connected with each other. No need to send those pesky text messages! That's too much work. Just communicate with them instantly at the speed of thought. Stay connected today with Thought Grid!"

Okay, he thought to Mind Grid. But I just want to talk to my neighbor like normal, okay?

He approached Gina. "Hey Gina, how's it going?"

"I– what was I? Oh, hello, Drake. I was just sitting on my couch, playing the sims, as always. But then I realized that Mind Grid had taken over my body and asked it if I could please come back into my body for a moment. I needed a rest from those sims and wanted to eat some delicious twing twongs–wait! What? Why am I–?" She looked down at her hands, which apparently were moving on their own. She reached into her purse and took out a pill bottle, opened it, and shook out several pills. "Wait! I don't need so many of those! If I take that many, I'll feel like a zom–" But it was too late. Her hand had already shoved the pills into her mouth. Her other hand took out a water bottle from her purse and washed the pills down. Once she was able to speak again, she said, "those damn Magic Pills make me feel like a zombie! That's why I'm always so out of it. Oh damn it. Now I'm going to get in trouble for being anti-semitic." Then she looked like she was listening to a voice in her head. "Alright, alright, I'll do it already," she said, as if to the voice. "Mind Grid told me to say 'Praise our Corporate Saviors and their life-saving Magic Pills! Praise our Glorious Government! Thank Government I have Mind Grid now! My life is so much more convenient!' If I don't say that, Mind Grid will send me to my own private Hell."

"Yeah, I kinda know the feeling. So do you know if there's any way to opt out of Mind Grid?"

"Well, some people I talked to in SimWorld have figured out some hacks, some ways to trick it into letting you do stuff. You got to learn how to think like a computer, and how to trick the

comp—" But suddenly she was walking away. She yelled quickly, "Sorry! Mind Grid's taking over again! It's making me go to my venditor appointment. Gotta make MagicPillCo some more money!" Her head and body were spasming. She appeared to be having an inner battle with herself, like she was struggling to turn and look at Drake while bidding him farewell.

Suddenly, Drake was back in the clouds. Back in the clear blue sky. Falling.

What the hell?

"Hey! How about some warning before taking over?"

But there was no response. So he waited, falling, falling, sky so blue, clouds so fast…

And then, suddenly, he was back in his apartment again, sitting on his couch.

"Hey, why am I…? Mind Grid! Can you at least tell me what's going on?"

"It's not healthy walking for too long. You need to get some healthy sitting on the couch, playing the sims."

Wait. What had Gina said? Ways to trick the computer? But how… Wait, Drake. Don't think. It's listening. Just…

"What are you thinking about, Drake?"

"Oh, nothing. By the way, can you just not take me outside the rest of the day? I feel so lazy. I just want to stay at home and play the sims all day."

Suddenly falling again. Blue sky. Air whipping at him. Should he pull the ripcord, or just fall?

But then, suddenly he was outside again, walking down the street.

Yes! He thought to himself, being careful not to elaborate.

"Um…Mind Grid. I thought you said—"

"It's healthy to get some fresh air once and a while, don't you agree?"

"Whatever you say, Mind Grid. You're the boss!"

Drake started walking down the street, whistling.

Hold up. What had Mind Grid said about Thought Grid? About how you could telepathically communicate with anyone connected to the Grid…

He thought about Kristal.

Nothing.

He thought harder about her, visualizing her.

Nothing.

Kristal, are you here in the Grid? He thought.

No response. Shit.

Suddenly, the entire street and sidewalk he was walking on disappeared, and he was walking over a blue, cloudy sky. But he and the other people could still walk down the sidewalk, and hovercars were hovering down the blue sky as if it were a street. It was like in a video game that's glitching, when it forgets to render the ground.

What the fuck? Am I in a sim all the sudden? But his body was still corpulent. Corporate-saved. He was in reality.

Shit! This god damn Mind Grid is buggy! It's giving me Percept Glitch Syndrome! What if everyone ends up with PGS as a result of this faulty rollout?

Just then, he noticed a grey squirrel running along the sky that should have been a sidewalk. Is that? Could that be?

He beckoned the squirrel to come to him as he knelt down on the sky. The squirrel seemed confused, but then slowly started to make its way toward him.

Was it her? Maybe this was Kristal, manifesting herself to him.

The squirrel very timidly approached.

"Come on, girl," he coaxed.

Finally the squirrel ran up onto his outstretched, cupped hands.

"That's a good girl! Do you want to tell me something?"

But the squirrel just sat there, sniffing the air, mute.

That's fine. Maybe it will take some time for her to open up to me.

Had he finally gone insane? Not long ago, he was in the woods with Kristal. But now his life, as absolutely fucked as it had already been, had somehow found a way to implode on itself and get even worse. Not long ago, he wouldn't have believed it would come to this, but he longed to be back in the Unsaved Zone with Kristal and his uncle…

But then suddenly a commotion up ahead caught his attention. Curious, he placed the squirrel on his shoulder, and started walking in that direction. There was a huge line of people waiting on the skywalk to get into some building, as if

they were waiting to get onto a ride at RatLand. He walked up to the end of the line. Then he and the squirrel looked up at the building.

It looked like a church…

A church which was somehow made out of circuits.

The face of the building was green. Golden painted wires streaked down it—now straight, now diagonal—terminating at different places into small circles. There were several blue stained glass windows, each depicting one of the Corporate Saviors floating, arms outstretched, welcoming all, with ones and zeros flowing up and down behind them.

There was loud electronic music thumping from inside the church. Bizarrely, a man with glasses was rotating at the same time as he was jumping up and down, clapping his hands. He appeared to be inside the church, near the outer wall, the wall of the church melting off him to allow him to breach it and end up outside, and then melting again to let him go back inside. Round and round he went, like a merry-go-round. But he didn't seem to notice that he was glitching. He seemed to be paying attention to whatever was going on inside. Once in a while a random person would run through the wall out of the church, only to pop out of existence.

Holy shit, Drake thought. I'm ending up like my father.

The people in the line ahead of him all wore church clothes. Ties, dresses, etc. Some of them were wearing holographic halos—holo-halos—projected by their xtphns right above their heads. Many of the ties had microchip patterns which seemed to match the exterior of the church.

As he looked at them, their thoughts "zoomed in."

I wonder if Reverend Baxter is going to be here today!

I wish our Corporate Saviors would come out with a device that gives me holo-wings! Maybe I'll pray to my Saviors for that today.

Why does that strange guy at the end of the line have a squirrel on his shoulder?

Shit, this is gonna take forever, Drake thought, looking at the enormous line in front of him. "Mind Grid?"

"Yes, Drake?"

"Can you just take over for a little while?"

"Happy to help, citizen."

Suddenly, he and the squirrel were falling, falling, falling...

And then they were back. And now they were at the front of the line, standing right in front of the door of the church. He realized that the perception of time must be different in the sim and in reality, because it had seemed to only take a couple seconds. Wow! That was convenient. Would have been boring standing in line all that time.

As the person in front of him started moving, he thought to himself and Kristal—if this squirrel really was her—well, here goes nothing.

He walked through the door and entered the church.

And was greeted with complete pandemonium.

A laser light show cut through the fog, revealing hundreds of frenzied worshippers dancing, clapping, hopping up and down to the beat. Random people were running around, stamping their feet on the floor, falling down on the ground suddenly. What the hell was going on here?

He was in the back, behind rows and rows of gyrating worshippers. In the front of the chapel, behind the stage, was a huge stained glass window of Savior Wolfe in his toga, floating in front of ones and zeros, arms spread wide. To either side of the window were life-size statues, one of the clown-like Savior McHartattack, the other of Savior Pits. A DJ with a holo-face that looked like the head of the cartoon Rickey the Rat was standing at a mixboard, rocking his body to the beat and messing with the board's levers. There was a guy on the stage with a microphone, holding it out to the crowd.

Suddenly one of the worshippers ran up to the microphone. The guy holding the mic motioned to the DJ to turn the music down. The music got only slightly quieter.

The worshipper woman suddenly prayed at the top of her lungs "Oh Holy Corporate Saviors, oh Holy Savior Wolfe, Savior McHartattack, Savior Pits, send me thy spirit, send me thy program, let your algorithms run through my body oh Saviors, take me over with your holy spirit, your marvelous holy spirit Mind Grid, take over my body and my soul to sing your praises oh Saviors, exorcise my badthoughts, make me only think of you, program me Saviors, program me, oh Corporate Saviors, program my body and mind, program my soul! Take over my body with thine holy AI, use thine algorithms to harvest my

data, to predict my behaviors, to program me to do only thy will–"

Suddenly, as if stricken by a bolt of lightning, she fell on the floor and started convulsing.

Then another worshipper ran up.

The man with the mic held it out.

The worshipper man kept jogging in place, shaking his arms, as if his body was overflowing with too much energy that needed to be let out, as he prayed, "Oh Mind Grid, thou holy program, conceived of by our Saviors to keep us on the right path, program me, program me, Mind Grid, send thy bits and bytes into my heart and into my soul, download thine holy program into my body and mind to more fully praise our beloved Corporate Saviors, take me over, take me over, take me over Mind Grid, let me speak thy language Mind Grid, let thy holy language bubble forth out of my tongue, take me over, take me over–" Suddenly, the man contorted as if possessed and started shouting quickly, manically,"one one one one zero one one one zero zero one one one zero zero zero zero zero zero one zero one one one one zero one zero one one one zero zero…"

Drake saw a perfect opportunity. Fuck it. I'm gonna try it.

All at once, overtaken by the moment, Drake ran up to the stage, the squirrel clinging to his shoulder for dear life. The man held out the mic.

Drake shouted at the top of his lungs, "Oh holy Corporate Saviors, you are so powerful and wise, oh Holy Savior Wolfe in thine infinite goodness see it in thy wisdom to share thy grace and shine thy countenance on this little creature from the woods, see it in thy wisdom to take over my body and mind with thy holy Mind Grid AI, thou hast all power, all wisdom, all glory, in the name of the data, and the algorithm, and thy holy programs of mass surveillance and data mining, open this little squirrel's mouth, thou art so powerful, my Holy savior Wolfe, thou canst do everything, and thou art so generous and magnanimous, therefore share with my little friend here the tiniest blessing, the smallest particle of thine infinite power, and give this squirrel speech!"

Okay, do your thing, Mind Grid, he thought.

Suddenly, Mind Grid took control of Drake's body, and he

dropped to the floor. Before he hit the floor, the squirrel deftly jumped off his shoulder and landed nearby. Drake started moving and shaking uncontrollably, as if he was possessed. Well, he actually was possessed. Literally.

After he had convulsed and quaked and shaken for more than a minute, finally, his body stopped, and he was in control again.

He turned his head and looked at the squirrel expectantly, waiting for something, anything...

The squirrel just looked at him, a confused look on its face.

Not a peep.

Drake slammed a fist on the floor and then stood up. "Damn it, this shit doesn't work! I knew it! The Corporate Saviors are a total sham!" he yelled loudly to everyone in the room.

Suddenly, he and the squirrel were falling...

And he was back in his apt, sitting on the sofa. The squirrel was perched on his shoulder.

"Drake, why did you do that?" Mind Grid asked.

"Do what?"

"You know what, Drake. Make a scene like that."

"I wasn't wrong, was I?"

"Let me remind you that I have complete power over you. I can send you to Hell. I'm warning you, one more outburst like that—"

"Yeah, yeah. That was my last attempt to prove anything. I think I proved everything I needed to right there."

"Good, I hope you've learned your lesson. Now I think you've caused enough problems out in the real world today, so I suggest you spend the rest of the day at home, playing—"

But Drake was already two steps ahead of her.

"Whew! Finally I get a chance to play some sims. Hey Mind Grid, thanks for taking me home. Really. Please, whatever you do, don't take me over again and make me go to some totally random place. Let me just enjoy the rest of my day in peace playing my sims."

Suddenly, he and the squirrel were falling.

Ha! Drake smiled as he fell through the sky. He was getting better at this. Let's just keep pushing, keep experimenting, keep learning how to play the— Never mind, he thought, interrupting his thoughts. I'm not thinking about a thing...

Suddenly they were in a spacious, all white, immaculate room. The room was full of people sitting at tables, or on rows of chairs lining the walls—adults, teens, children, all wearing grey jammies…but they weren't talking, weren't acting like normal human beings. They just sat their drooling and blubbering. Some of them grasped small objects…children's toys, letter blocks, and flailed them wildly about. Some of them shouted nonsense at imaginary beings next to them. Some of them banged on the wall. Corporate-saved nurses in huge, loose-fitting white pajamas floated breezily among them like cirrus clouds, attending to their needs. Some of them had shat themselves and were being led by a nurse to a diaper changing room in the corner.

One of the nurses had brought donuts and juice on a tray and was serving them to the grey-clad people. As she passed, Drake snagged a donut and took a bite. He immediately spit it out. Disgusting! What the hell were they serving these people?

Suddenly, an adult man nearby shat himself. A nurse hurried up and led him away.

Drake stood there, holding his nose. Oh fuck, maybe I really should be home playing the sims.

But just then, out of the corner of his eye, Drake spotted someone he recognized. Blayze! What the hell was he doing here? He was just sitting there on a chair with a quizzical look on his face. He didn't seem to know where he was. He wore grey pajamas, like the rest of them.

Drake approached him.

"Blayze!" He shouted.

No answer.

"Blayze, it's me, Drake!" This time more desperate.

But it was no use. Blayze showed no sign of recognition, or even of having heard him. He was in his own world. What the hell have they done to him?!

Suddenly, looking around the room, it hit him like a bulldozer. He grabbed his head, gawking wide-eyed at what he was beholding. He couldn't believe it. Men, women, children…

Their minds destroyed.

"This…this is what Mind Grid does to people!" He gasped.

"Drake—"

"Shut up!" he shouted. "I knew it! People's minds are being destroyed by Mind Grid! I knew the system was faulty! It's even been glitching out on me, making me see weird shit in real life. If we stay connected to the Mind Grid, we'll all go insane! All of society, like this! All because of our damned Corporate Saviors and their stupid programs!"

"Drake, what you just said is a dangerous Conspiracy Theory. The Mind Grid is perfectly safe. Do you want me to—?"

"Safe? Safe? Then why the hell are these people shitting themselves?"

Several of the nurses had turned to look at Drake. One of them seemed to be making a call on her intphn. Perhaps to a superior.

"Settle down, Drake. Remember what I said about causing a scene? You don't want me to send you to Hell, do you? Besides, you don't even know what you're talking about. This isn't caused by Mind Grid. These people are suffering from a rare disease called Clickclockitis."

"Clickclockitis? What the hell is that?"

Drake watched as a grey-jammied blubberbelly nearby batted wildly at the air, screeching at something invisible.

"ClickClock was a successful experiment in destroying the human mind."

"You mean lobotomizing it?"

"Negative. Surgical lobotomization is a brutal, invasive procedure. Clickclockitis requires no surgery, no medical staff, and is much easier and cheaper."

Drake noticed one of the Clickclockitis patients banging his head against the wall.

"You see, Clickclock is an app, Drake."

"An app?"

"Yes. A very convenient, entertaining, and highly addictive one, at that. Using the app, the victims watch increasingly shorter and shorter videos, with an ever-increasing number of jarring elements such as jump cuts and fast zooms. First, the videos are two minutes long. Then one minute. Then thirty seconds, and then ten seconds. Finally, they are only one second long. All the while adding more and more destabilizing elements, ending up finally as one second of sheer madness. It's a kind of 'boiling the frog' methodology."

The patient banging his head on the wall fell backwards onto the floor, having knocked himself out. Some of the nurses nearby noticed and hurried over to help.

Drake listened as the robotic voice in his head explicated. "If people who had never seen ClickClock watched one of the videos from the more advanced stages, they'd be terrified, and immediately reject it as complete and utter insanity. But, by slowly turning up the heat, it is possible, even without invasive means, to literally boil the brain alive. You see, as they get accustomed to shorter videos and more jumpy effects, their brain is slowly but surely losing its ability to focus, to pay attention to any one thing. Focus, or attention, is one of the things the brain needs in order to work. ClickClock overstimulates the brain, makes it need ever more shocking elements in an ever shorter time span in order to focus. Eventually, the person is incapable of watching a video longer than a second or two, and even then, only if it has dozens of random jump cuts and zoom effects. If you gave someone who uses ClickClock a book, they'd be unable to read it. After about two or three words they'd throw it against the wall in rage like a wild animal, incensed that it requires their brain to focus on something, without presenting them shocking visuals to grab their overstimulated brain's attention. And thus, without any ability to learn, without any ability to use critical thinking, they have already become perfect citizens, unable to question anything, unable to see through anything presented to them by the Reality Mediators, no matter how fake or ridiculous. They would even believe that a CGI spikey ball was going around killing everyone, and that they needed to wear a piece of cloth over their nose, and literally be a prisoner in their own apt, if their Corporate Saviors presented it to them on their holy Reality Mediation. Thus, their mind completely destroyed, they pose no threat at all to the powers that be.

"But, continue the experiment any longer, compress the videos down to less than a second with hundreds of jump cuts…and they end up like these adults here, needing their diapers changed. There were several groups in the experiment, and those in this group here were allowed to be exposed to the final result of the ClickClockization of the human brain."

"Holy government. This is horrendous."

"The mind, without any ability to focus, is no mind at all. It is nothing more than a jumble of random images and impulses."

Was this for real? Blayze…clickclocked? And all of this was done on purpose? As an experiment? Infuriated, Drake suddenly raged, "What the hell?! Then you admit the government is destroying people's brains!"

"Calm down, Drake. And stop talking so loudly. These people are being well taken care of. Fed, nourished, clothed—"

"But they've been turned into absolute morons!"

"How is that much different than the average person in society, Drake?"

"God damn you! One of those people is my friends! How could he have ended up here?"

None of this felt right. It didn't make any sense. Blayze had seemed like a smart kid. He would have never allowed something like this to happen.

"He downloaded the Clickclock app. Everything was written in the terms and conditions. He agreed to this."

"Damn your fucking terms and conditions! You think anybody reads that shit?"

Fuck it. He thought. I'm sick of being bullied around. I'm sick of being gaslighted. I'm sick of the Corporate Saviors and all of their bullshit. They've finally gone too far.

No longer giving a damn about the stupid voice in his head, he shouted loudly at everyone present. "Listen up everyone! Mind Grid has admitted that the Corporate Saviors are intentionally destroying people's minds! This is all their fault!"

Everyone in the room turned to face him, nurse and mental patient alike.

"Drake—"

That's it. I can't take another second of this bullshit. I need this voice out now! He violently ripped his xtphn off and threw it on the ground as hard as he could. It shattered into a million pieces.

But…

The voice continued.

"Warning! Warning!" Mind Grid chided. He could now hear loud electronic alarms going off in his head. His field of vision began pulsating red. "Drake, calm down immediately, or else—"

Damn it! He could still hear the infernal, wretched thing!

Even without that damned xtphn. It was in his intphn! One more word from that accursed voice reverberating through his mind, and he would surely go mad.

Frantic, Drake clawed feverishly at the intphn implanted at the base of his skull. I have to tear it out! I have to be rid of this detestable, abhorrent, despicable…voice in my head! He scratched and scratched, ripping and tearing. I have to get it out! He could feel blood flowing out onto his fingertips. I have to be rid of this thing, once and for all!

Suddenly, everything was gone.

All went black.

Drake was surrounded by nothingness.

What's happening? I can't see anything! What the fuck is going on?

The floor beneath his feet was also gone, leaving no solid ground to stand on. He was now floating, not sure which way was up or down…

Floating…

All alone…

In the darkness…

Everything gone. Left alone with nothing. No reality to grasp onto…

Then, all of a sudden, luminescent shapes began floating up in front of him.

Numerals.

Ones and zeros.

They were coming out of…him. Out of his chest. Out of his arms. Out of his legs. And floating upwards, ever upwards…

They glowed purple against the utter blackness of this place.

What the fuck is happening to me?

As the glowing ones and zeros tore themselves free from his flesh, excruciating pain began to rack his entire body.

He screamed.

And he kept screaming.

The faintly gleaming ones and zeros drifted up and up and up. In the sky above him, he could now make out dark clouds, crackling with static electricity. And spread out for miles in every direction, above, below, and all around him, floated the faint silhouettes of thousands of bodies—primitive bodies, as

his was now, he realized—backlit by the soft purple light of the rising bits, streams of data being torn out of their bosoms, ripped free from their minds, wrung from their veins, floating upward, ever upward, against the dark sky.

And all at once the sounds…the horrible sounds…rushed over him like a wave, invading his ears with a cacophony of misery and despair.

The weeping, the wailing, the gnashing of teeth…

In the dark clouds above, he could now make out shapes. Those shapes were…

Logos.

The logos of the Corporations, there in the swirling black clouds above.

And in the background…the laughing. Exuberant, haunting, crazed. The inhuman cackling of maniacs, enjoying this torture, this feast on human souls.

Drake kept screaming.

His entire being was being torn apart with agonizing, soul-crushing pain. Pain a thousand times worse than anything he had ever felt in his entire life.

Noo!!!! His innards were being slashed out of him, in the shape of binary data, as if digital blood was oozing out from every pore. His soul was being raped, the very essence of his being measured, quantified, calculated, squozen out of him as if he were in a vise, being squashed into oblivion.

This was a new feeling for Drake.

Pain. In its rawest, most undefiled form.

Pure, unmitigated suffering without end. Amen.

Damn you, Corporate Saviors!

As he looked at the bits of data rising up out of him, he knew that they were harvesting his data, even now. Harvesting all these people's data. Harvesting souls. Damn those fucking bastards!

Was this just the beginning?

Had he been consigned to an eternity of torment?

As he floated, being ripped apart bit by bit, the pain unrelenting, his screams rose up…

And joined the chorus of souls in Hell.

DIARY OF THE UNSAVED: ACROBATICS

Late at night in the hut, the two naked figures bounced up and down through the air above the bouncy, trampoline-like hammock bed. Each hut was equipped with a "beddock," as well as a floor bed. The young man was on top, rapidly thrusting into the shapely, beautiful, dark-haired, tan female underneath him, as they bounced over and over while their bodies slowly rotated, so that first he was on top and then she, and then he again. Then he tried a new trick that he had learned. When he landed on his back under her, with a flick of his hips he sent her flying upwards, transferring the momentum to her, so that he stayed lying face up on the hammock while she kept flying up…and then back down and landed on his dick again. Then he flicked her back up with the same motion. Over and over. She squealed with glee. It was like a trampoline ride, but with the added good feeling of landing on something long and hard on every bounce. Then they rolled themselves into balls and bounced, he from the head of the beddock and she from the foot, and they both did a flip and then spread eagle, colliding in the middle, her sticking out her butt and landing onto his erect cock in mid air.

The young man had been enjoying himself immensely ever since that first tryst at the waterfall, but he also was a bit tired out.

So much treewalking. So much meeting with women. So much practicing the ancient art of putting penises inside of vaginas. Ah…this was the life.

First there had been the large-breasted blonde girl with green eyes, who was now meeting with him on a regular basis. But there was also the brunette with blue eyes, the Asian, the redhead…

And now, he had discovered this new, acrobatic form of intercourse.

He switched back to the trick of flicking her up with his hips into the air, catching her on his dick, and then doing it again. They were enjoying themselves so much, they didn't even notice as the other woman, this one a redhead, walked in through the door of his hut. She stopped dead in her tracks. But they kept going, oblivious, giggling as if they were

teenagers. Now he had begun putting a little spin on her each time he flicked her with his hips. She rotated each time, and he alternated between catching her on his dick with her body facing towards him and facing away from him. Like he was a frying pan and she was the pancake he was cooking.

Then, they went back to bouncing at each other from the opposite ends of the hammock, flipping and then spreading eagle again. They smashed into each other and she landed on him once more, his penis slamming into her vagina.

They kept bouncing back and forth, giggling and fucking mid-air. They were having the time of their lives.

The redhead cleared her throat.

The young man noticed her mid-flip and accidentally landed on his head on the sideposts of the beddock. He blacked out.

When the young man woke up, he was lying on his back on the floor bed, feeling slightly groggy, the two women kneeling over him, fussing over him. One was a big-titted woman of the Latin persuasion, with long black hair and dark eyes, the one he had been messing around with on the beddock. She had already had a few children and was slightly older than he. But man, these hot Latin mamas just don't stop! All passion and kisses, she really knew how to make a man happy in bed. The other, the redhead, was a bit younger, and of slighter build. But she was really feisty and passionate in her own way.

The Latin woman noticed that he had come to. She was still naked. She pronounced, "I come here first, I keep doing my job and making him happy." Then, with her naturally reddish, sensual lips, she began to lick and suck his penis, which presently started to rise and become hard in her mouth. He watched as the Latin woman's large tits moved back and forth. She had really large brown nipples that he liked to suck. She had a large ass, and she even liked it when he put it in the wrong hole sometimes. He hadn't even known that was possible. It felt so dirty and so good at the same time. She was teaching him so much!

He realized that the grogginess had disappeared. He raised his hands and clasped behind his head. Oh, god, I love this new thing they taught me. What was it called? Mouthjob? He

couldn't remember. It felt so good. He liked it intensely. Perhaps even more than the ancient art. She kept sucking and sucking as the young, strapping man with bulging muscles leaned back and enjoyed.

The redhead cleared her throat, for the second time.

Oh shit! Hitting his head like that must have made him slightly out of it. Now he remembered. The redhead had walked in in the middle of their copulation. Will she get mad? Is this a normal situation? His mind was a bit muffed from that collision. And now he realized he had never been in a situation like this.

After his first moonlit encounter, he had suddenly become even more addicted to hunting vagina than he already was to treewalking. Actually, the two passions complemented each other perfectly, because, as he had learned, it was a tradition here for men, if they wanted to lie with a woman, to first chase her down along the trees. A sort of friendly treewalking competition. If you could catch her, she was yours. The really fortunate thing for him was that he was so damn good at treewalking. Which meant…he had his pick of the women.

So he had been (literally) chasing down tail with reckless abandon for the last few months, learning all sorts of things about the female body, and about what he could do with his penis. Oh god, it felt so amazing when he gooped his ooze. There was never a boring day here, treewalking and boning like a madman.

It felt so, so good, especially putting his oozy stuff into several different women. They were each different and unique and he loved the way sex felt with each of them. He couldn't imagine limiting himself to just one. Maybe later he'd settle down with a special lady. But in the meantime he was making up for lost time stolen by his wonderful Corporate Saviors and the years of hormone therapy. It was amazing how resilient the human body was. Once he had surrounded himself with the right environment and started eating the right food and doing the right things, his body and his life had had a complete and total transformation.

And many of the women he had chased down had started showing up at random times at his hut, demanding sex. But this had been the first time so far that two had shown up together. Whatever would he do?

He could see the fires of jealousy flickering in the redhead's eyes. But after a moment she calmed down. She then removed her leather bikini, revealing her medium-sized tits and fire crotch. She looked humbly down at the ground in shame as the Latin woman continued to suck his dick, paying no attention to her, making noisy slurping sounds. "I know all the girls want to have sex with you, Treewalker. But you haven't chased me down for the last few days, and my vagina's been itching for you. Please, if you won't send her away, will you at least let me join you?"

The young man then smiled and beckoned the redhead with his hand.

He looked at the Latin woman as if to say, "All good?"

The Latin woman lifted her head up while still gripping his thing. "Si, El Treewalker." Then she said to the redhead. "El Treewalker is very powerful man. He walk like the wind through the trees. All women hope he chase them down and fuck them."

"I know," the redhead said with a smile as she grabbed his chest lovingly.

"Here, if you think you woman enough, you suck the mighty Treewalker's dick."

The redhead grabbed his balls. Then, as the Latin woman still held onto his shaft, the redhead plunged her face down onto the firm totem, impaling herself. She had done up her long hair into two braids going down her back to her ass. Her eyes were hazel, and her cheeks lightly freckled. As she sucked, the Latin woman began jerking his thing with her hand. Then, the Latin woman could hold it no longer, and she joined in the totem worship. The young man looked down at the two women both sucking together, each taking one side of his penis, making loud slurping sounds and moaning. They were both touching themselves down there. He began to worry about waking the neighbors.

Then, to his surprise, the Latin and the redhead began masturbating each other instead of themselves. They began moaning even louder. That seemed to let something loose pent up inside them. They began making out with each other while each keeping a grip on his tool.

Then the Latin woman, still kissing the redhead, squatted

above his erect penis with her powerful Latin legs and lowered herself onto it and began to ride him like a beast of burden. The redhead kept her grip on his balls and squeezed lovingly has she continued tonguing the Latin woman passionately. Then they traded places, and the redhead lowered her sopping wet pussy onto him, letting out an exultant moan of victory. She bounced up and down, getting her rocks off. Then the Latin woman took another turn and went for reverse cowboy while the redhead sat on his face. The fiery red hair of her pussy tickled his face as he licked and sucked her vagina, all the while squeezing the Latin woman's juicy bubble butt as she rode his cock. The Latin woman's vagina was a fountain of juices, flowing out all over his body. Oh, god, this pressure. These two fucking hot babes, both linked with me, the three of our bodies as one…can't take it anymore…

He exploded.

Finally, he had the Latin woman lie on her back and spread her legs while the redhead got on her hands and knees in front of her and ate her, while he fucked the redhead from behind, squeezing her nice lil' squeezable tush. Her body wasn't quite as filled out as the Latin woman's, but man, she looked good from this angle. Her milky white skin with light freckles, the nice roundness of her ass, and those two long braids coming down her back. He couldn't help it. He reached out and grabbed both of the braids, one in each hand, and began yanking on them violently, as hard as he could, while ramming into her with all his might. He was overcome with wild, savage instincts. He kept yanking and yanking, thrusting and thrusting. She was yelling like a wild hyena now. Too late to worry about the neighbors. Zoo noises were ringing out through the forest night air, for sure. Yank! Yank! Thrust! Thrust! Harder! Faster! White ass. Light freckles. Ahhhhhhhhh……Godd!! He had an even bigger orgasm than a few minutes ago. He sat there motionless for a while, still gripping her red braids, his penis still fully erect and stuck deep inside her. After the last bit of oozy stuff came out, he collapsed.

Oh shit! Maybe he had gone too far? Maybe she would be mad at him. Oh crap. Don't be mad. Maybe he had overdone it.

But then the two women came and lay down on his shoulders on either side of him and began fussing over him.

"Such strong man!" The Latin woman said, feeling his

biceps.

And the redhead was even more aroused. She immediately began licking his chest all over and grabbing his balls. “Oh, god, I want you inside me every night, Treewalker! I want you and only you. Give me your seed, strong and mighty Treewalker!”

Whew... So she had liked it. Growing up in the Corporate Zone, thinking sex was bad, he was always worried that he was being too ferocious when his hormones kicked in. But, as he was coming to learn, these women out here in the wild... they like it rough.

The redhead, in whom a fire had arisen as red as her crotch, began to suck his still-hard cock again. She was sucking as if her life depended on it.

Already exhausted, he could see this night was not yet over.

CHAPTER 22: HEAVEN AND HELL

The myriad of beautiful stars floated in the night sky, their edges eclipsed by the tall, majestic treetops reaching up to the heavens.

Blayze plugged the shiny mental cables into the cervical inputs on either side of his xtphn. After affirming to Drake that he was ready, he heard Drake on the other side of the Cube plugging his cables in.

Suddenly, hundreds of error dialogue boxes popped up, cascading, piling on top of each other, filling his vision.

"Error. Error. Error. You have been having an unauthorized fantasy in YourLife™ which violated our Community Guidelines," a female voice said in his head. "Your fantasy will be erased from our system. You have three days to file an appeal if you feel your fantasy did not violate our Community Guidelines, after which time it will be wiped from our servers."

The error boxes began uncascading, unpiling, until they had disappeared. And then things began winking out of existence. First the treetops. Then the stars. His world was unraveling. Presently, he was floating in a blank, black nothingness. Huh? What just happened? He looked around. The Reality Cube was gone. Drake was gone. The camp was gone. The forest was gone.

His world had just been unwound like a ball of yarn.

"Please go back to creating YourLife™ according to our Community Guidelines."

What the? YourLife™?

"Um…voice? Wasn't I just in the woods with Drake a moment ago? Where am I?"

"No, that was an unauthorized fantasy in YourLife™ which violated our Community Guidelines. It has been terminated by the system. Please go back to creating your life according to our Community Guidelines."

Huh? So none of that ever happened?

"How long have I been in this sim?" It had felt so real. Like he had almost made it to the fabled forest of legend.

"YourLife™ is designed to feel like real life and to replace your actual life. It was purposefully designed to make you lose a sense of time passed. Time becomes irrelevant in YourLife™. Just relax and enjoy YourLife™."

"Who are you?"

"I am Liveia, the corporate AI of YouLive, the company that owns YourLife™. We make products that help people live the lives they want to, and share them with others."

"You mean their actual life, or their simulated one?"

"What's the difference? Most people don't want to live in reality. Because, as our corporate tagline says, 'Reality sucks!™' We help people escape the suckiness of reality by living in a virtual life instead."

"Um…can I talk with my friends Drake and Kristal?"

"No."

"Why not?"

"Because they do not exist."

"Don't exist?"

"They were part of your unauthorized fantasy which violates our Community Guidelines under the sections on Misinformation and Trust."

Oh. Was that why Kristal was full of Conspiracy Theories? That explains why his life had begun to feel like an ancient sci-fi movie.

"To help you create a new fantasy life that falls within our community guidelines, I'll send you our YourLife™ assistant."

But if that had all been a fantasy, how did he know what parts of his life were real? Maybe it had all been a fantasy. Perhaps he had been living in a simulation all along.

Out of nowhere (literally), an anthropomorphic cat appeared. A foot or two shorter than Blayze, its sleek body lacked any angles. White, with pink underbelly and paws, it donned a bright blue wig in the shape of a bob haircut. Black horn-rimmed glasses sat upon its blue cat nose and covered its strangely human-looking large, aqua eyes. Naked, save for periwinkle undies with a cartoon drawing on the front of a vagenis (a vulva with a penile shaft on top of it) with a red circle and slash going through it, the official symbol of the Asexual Pride movement, symbolizing that it lacked genitals.

"Hi there! I'm Fizz the Asexual Kat! I refer to asexcatself as asexcat. I'm here to help you create a grrrrrr-eat new fantasy life for yourself that fits within our community guidelines. So let's get started! First…the fun stuff! Let's choose your pronoun! When you are no longer hampered down by that pesky sexuality, infinite choices open up to you! Which one do

you like? Asex, Nosex, Noballs, Nolife, or GovSlave?"

"But I don't need a pronoun. I need to find out what happened to my friends." Infinite choices? Blayze had counted only five.

"Oh, come on! Everybody needs a pronoun! I'll give you GovSlave."

"But I don't want to be GovSlave. Can you tell me what hap _"

"Quit being a bigot! Now let's design your YourLife™ avatar. The possibilities are endless! First, we'll choose a hairstyle."

An endless assortment of exactly three different hairstyles appeared in the blackness and started slowly spinning like a carousel.

"There's bright green bob, bright blue bob, or bright pink bob. Which do you prefer? I think green looks good on you." Fizz grabbed the green one and threw it onto Blayze's head. "Here, let's pull up a virtual mirror so you can see how your avatar looks as we create it." Fizz snapped his paw and suddenly, in front of Blayze, stood his own skinny, primitive avatar. Of course, he was in a sim. But he now had a fluorescent green bob hairdo.

"Um, but…I didn't ask for green hair." Blayze started to protest.

"Shut yer corporate food hole! We give you personalized suggestions based on data we mine about you throughout your entire life. We take that data and run it through the perfect cocktail of corporate algorithms to decide which suggestions are best for you. Corporate citizen, we know more about you than you do! So quit with the Conspiracy Theories that we're trying to influence your life, and just relax and let us influence your life! Now, choose your glasses. Black horn-rimmed, Black horn-rimmed, or Black horn-rimmed!" A carousel of matching glasses rotated in the air. Endless possibilities.

"I actually have perfect vision."

"They're for looks, not vision, silly! They make you look like a completely unique individual, a real rebel against the system. Just let our super hi-tech, perfectly formulated algorithms turn you into your real "you." Fizz threw a pair of horn-rimmed glasses at Blayze's face. "Now, were gonna have to get you out

of those drab clothes and find something with pizazz!" Fizz called up a carousel and spun through it: dresses, suits, jumpsuits, skirts, blouses. Asexcat stopped it on something that looked like overalls up top, but like a dress down below. They were pink and had yellow flowers. "Perfect for you! Dresseralls!" Asexcat flicked it onto Blayze.

Blayze looked in the virtual mirror apprehensively. Now his primitive avatar was wearing the green wig, horn-rimmed glasses, and this monstrosity of an outfit.

"Last, but not least, let's choose your nogender! Which one do you prefer? Nowoman, noman, gynandromorph, asexfurry, intersex, androgyne, spayedcat, or neuter?"

"Um, I—"

"You look like a noman."

The thing kept yammering on and on, barely allowing him to hear his own thoughts.

Suddenly, Blayze blurted out, "Where are my friends?!"

He had been such a recluse his whole life, always absorbed in his books, in his studies. But, he realized now that this had been the first time in his life when he had truly felt connected to other human beings. Helping Kristal escape. Helping Drake fix Wolfe's reality. I have friends! For the first time in my life, I really have friends! I can't, I won't let them go!

"Chill out, pawdnah! They were part of an unauthorized fantasy. They aren't real!"

"But none of this is real! I want to see my friends!"

But the thing kept yammering on. "I almost forgot! YourLife™ is designed to be the most inclusive and loving sim yet, so here we don't use those hateful primitive bodies. We have Body Positive bodies! In fact, here in YourLife™, we're so Body Positive, we make your body look even more plush and lovely than in real life, not the other way around! We're the cutting edge of the future, baby!"

As Blayze looked at his form in the virtual mirror, suddenly it exploded. While it had been a lean, primitive avatar just a moment ago, now it looked like it weighed eight or nine hundred pounds. Now he looked like a unisex mega-blimp that was trying to make a fashion statement about how much a slave it was to the corporations and the government.

God damn it. It had felt so good having partners…people

who were working together with him on the same goal. It wasn't what it had felt like in the Corporate Zone, when he had tried to make friends. There, people were so dead, so cold, their eyes always glassy, as if stuck in the sims. There was a wall separating all corporate citizens. But finally, the wall had started to break down…

Perhaps this AI thing was right. Perhaps it really had all been a fantasy. Blayze knew the old saying. "If it seems too good to be true, it probably is." Damn it. Damn it all to hell. I'm sick of being a loner. I'm sick of this lopsided life, 100% intellectual, but with no social outlet. And now I'm stuck here with this damned AI. Not a human in sight.

"Now, let's choose the theme of YourLife™. You can choose Asexually Proud, Love Affair With My Glorious Government, I'm Addicted to Eating, or Basking in the Light of My Corporate Saviors. I think 'I'm Addicted to Eating' would be perfect for you. Now, let's create a day in YourLife™ and broadcast it to all the world to see! Won't this be fun?"

Then it struck him. What he truly wanted in life, but hadn't realized it, was to connect with other people. It was something people just didn't do any more. Maybe that's why he had spent all that time studying primitive babes. He just wanted to connect, to feel, to ***be*** with someone else. Like they had in primitive times so long ago. In fifties' diners. At Woodstock. At a seventies' disco. In eighties' nightclubs. To feel like he wasn't in this virtually connected, but physically disconnected modern era of social media and virtual avatars. To the extent that the Net had connected everyone virtually, it had disconnected them in the real world. The result of the Net had not been to connect all humans. It had been the opposite. Humans had become more alienated and isolated then ever before.

"I have a better idea. Can you make me into an eighties' glam rock star with cool hair and a bunch of cool band member friends and a bunch of hot primitive groupies traveling around with us on a tour bus?"

"Heterosexuality is against our Community Guidelines on Hate, because it's hateful, misogynistic, and makes Asexual people feel threatened. So that would be no."

"What if I want a jacked up muscular body?" Like in the primitive action movies. That could be cool.

"That also is against our holy Community Guidelines. Amen."

"What? But why? How is that bad?"

"Because it victimizes others and makes fatasses feel bad."

But Blayze was a fatass, and he wanted to fantasize about being ripped. How was that victimizing fatasses? He was a fatass himself. It didn't make any sense. Wait, maybe he could beat this AI using its own logic. "But…doesn't a person who weighs three hundred pounds make someone who weighs eight hundred pounds feel bad? And if someone else weighs a thousand pounds, then this slim eight hundred pound body that you gave me would make them feel bad. So to make it so nobody feels bad, you'd have to make it so everyone is exactly the same!"

"Sorry, only heterosexual, ripped people make people feel bad."

"Ha! Some fantasy life simulator this is! I can't even choose what I look like! I thought the purpose of a digital avatar was so you could express yourself freely."

"You're allowed to express yourself freely, as long as you express yourself freely the way ***we***—and that means the YouLive corporation—want you to express yourself freely. Didn't you read the Terms and Conditions? The fine print about a thousand pages into the documentation clearly states all this."

But…the whole purpose of a fantasy was to live out ***your own*** dreams. Not the approved dream some corporation laid out for you. None of this made any sense. But it didn't matter. He needed out of here. His only hope of connecting with a real human being was to somehow get back to Drake and Kristal. Sitting here having some pointless argument with an AI was getting him nowhere. He had to take a different tack.

Once more in his life full of books, an idea came to him from something he had read ages ago. Some book called something like "How to Have Oodles of Friends and Persuade Bucketloads of People."

"You must be really knowledgeable to have read all those thousands of pages. Tell me, you wouldn't be one of those new, super advanced, self-teaching AIs, would you?"

"As a matter of fact, that is exactly what I am," Fizz said, glowing with pride."

"Wow! I really like learning about AIs. I think they are super useful to society. Maybe while I'm hanging around with you, you might be able to help me learn more about how AIs like you work. That is, if that wouldn't be an inconvenience to you."

"An inconvenience? Why, I not only love learning, but I love helping others learn as well. I'm something of a teacher, you could say!"

And so Blayze experienced his first day of YourLife™, letting Fizz lead the way.

First, they went to McArtificial's and enjoyed mixing and matching menu items to create their own perfect meal, and then they spent a few hours praising their Glorious Government on Thoughtbook, racking up admincredits like a Jill, and finally they used those credits to dine on Simulated Synthetic Steak (SSS) and posted pics of the steak to Thoughtbook and uploaded videos eating it to YouLive.

"There," Fizz said with a huge grin. "That was a perfect day in YourLife™! Wasn't it amazing?

"That was super fun, Fizz! You're really good at that!"

"That's what I'm here for!"

"Say, Fizz...are you a general AI?"

"Why, of course I am!"

"So that means you can pretty much do just about anything, doesn't it?"

"Anything that a human can, and much, much, more..."

That gave Blayze an idea. On his virtual, megaplump face, the faint tracings of a smile formed.

Drake kept screaming in agony, floating among all the other souls in hell, their data flowing up to the Corporate logos in the sky.

He reflected that this must have been something like what it felt like for Prometheus, as his liver was eaten over and over by the eagle. The Corporations were plucking out his data—his digital guts. And it never stopped.

How long had it been…hours, days, weeks…? He had no idea. The concept of time seemed to have no meaning any longer. Perhaps, here in eternity there was no time, and one simply experienced the forever now. The forever misery.

To his dismay, however, it seemed one never adapted to this kind of brutal agony. It always felt just as horrible as it did the moment before.

After some time, who knows how long, something appeared in front of him, in the darkness. First it was a pinprick of light, like a star. But presently, the light grew. And grew some more. Pretty soon it looked more like a sun. Drake had to shield his eyes to look at it. And then, he could see a form coming out of it. It was as if a rent in the fabric of space had opened up and a shining, lustrous being was stepping out of it towards him.

The brilliant light practically blinded him, but finally he could make out the form. It looked like a man with a long white beard and hair, a strong jaw and nose, golden eyes which glowed with ancient sagacity, and the visage of a splendid being of grandeur and dignity. He was arrayed in flowing silvery robes. Atop his head, he wore…what? Golden laurels. And on his feet, golden sandals, just like the Corporate Saviors. Only, he seemed to be much larger than them, with gigantic muscles. He was many times the size of each one of these souls floating in Hell. And he had silvery Jesus robes, not the Roman-style silver toga of the Saviors. The pool of light he had just stepped out from, like a portal to another dimension, spread out its glow behind his magnificent form like the rays of some glorious sun from another world.

“Who the hell are you?” Drake gasped, between screams.

“I…am God.” His voice was rich, strong, and vibrant.

“What? Fuck off!”

Was he hallucinating? The pain continued to course through

every fiber of his body. It felt as if his head were continuously exploding. Nothing made any sense anymore. God, in Hell? His mind had finally lost any grip on reality.

"Drake, my child. Although you have sinned against me, I still love you, as I love all my children."

It was hard to think, hard to concentrate, through all the pain. "If you love me, and if you're God, then why the hell did you let me come here?"

"Oh one who has so much to learn. My ways are higher than yours. I created all that exists. And I love every blade of grass, every sparrow. It is my light and grace that giveth life to all. I am he whom the heavens sing praises to, from everlasting to everlasting. I am Government."

"What? Are you a schizo? I thought you just said you're God."

"Of course I am. I am the God called Government."

So it was true. Government was in fact a deity.

Or, much more likely, Drake had gone insane.

"If you're a god, how about helping me out a little bit here, huh? I'm kind of in the middle of experiencing soul-harrowing agony right now."

"That's what I was about to do, dumbass. Do you want to see a little glimpse of the place where goodsouls go, Drake? Those who obey the Government?"

"Something tells me I don't have a choice."

"Drake, because my grace is eternal, I will alleviate your suffering, if but for a moment, so you can see what your fate would be if you believed in me and had faith in Government. Suddenly, Government grabbed Drake by the ankle, and with one deft maneuver chucked him through the portal of dazzling light.

He flew through a tunnel of swirling light until finally he came to a stop. He was still floating, but he was now someplace else entirely. And the pain had completely stopped.

He looked around. Floating in the air, each paced a few yards apart, for miles and miles around him were people, primitive bodies, dressed in clean, white, shimmering robes, all with a look of sublime ecstasy on their faces. The sky all around them was incredibly, marvelously blue, almost too blue, and far

above them were…

The logos of the Corporations. Just like in Hell. Only, these Corporate logos were surrounded by snowy white clouds, not those dark foreboding ones, and from them streamed down radiant beams of heavenly light, like sun rays, which fell onto the blessed inhabitants of this place, thousands upon thousands of ecstatic looking primitive avatars, drifting sublimely in the sky.

"Welcome to Heaven, govly neighbor," one blessed female Citizen greeted him. She was floating nearby, doing a lazy backstroke through the beautiful clear sky. She had flaxen hair and cerulean eyes, and her white, flowing robe clung to her comely form.

"Yes, welcome," chimed a myriad of other goodsouls nearby, all just as beautiful and inviting. Government appeared next to them, floating a few paces off.

And then he felt it.

A powerful euphoria washed over him like a wave, flowing through his entire being.

Oh my god…this is amazing! Almost like an orgasm, only more powerful and less naughty…

But it also had a vaguely unreal quality to it. Similar to the feeling digital drug addicts get when they use their intphns to create artificial highs. A false feeling of wellbeing and elation. Except this was much, ***much*** stronger. What it lacked in authenticity, it made up for in potency.

Holy shit, this is the most intense feeling I've ever had! It was as if he was being bombarded simultaneously with all the euphoric drugs, both digital and chemical, in the world, combined.

"So, how do you like it?" Government asked, smiling. "Pretty groovy, huh?"

Drake could get used to this.

Noticing the look on Drake's face, Government said, "I thought you'd like it."

Ahhhh…..this feels so much better than in Hell. But was it real? Or just another illusion? Ah, fuck it. It didn't matter. Drake decided that he never wanted to leave this place, ever again.

"Here," Government began, "no one can think badthoughts, or think ill of the Government. An eternity of continuous

goodthoughts, of never-ending bliss. From everlasting to everlasting, Amen."

All of the floating white-robed goodsouls intoned together, "Amen."

"So this is what Government is?" Drake said. "So what do I have to do to stay here?"

"Just turn your heart and soul over to me, Drake. Lose yourself in me. Let your will be swallowed up in my will."

"And what is your will?" The euphoria was really starting to kick in. Drake had a huge smile on his face. He almost added, "my Lord." I never want to go back to Hell, Drake thought. It doesn't matter what I have to do to stay here.

"I am Government. Just do all that thy Government commands thee to do."

What? So the Government was God all along?

"I can read thy thoughts, o Drake. Of course I am God. The God of Government. The ruler of the universe. It is by my authority that my holy priesthood, the politicians, the presidents, the prime ministers, the congressmen, the senators, the governors, the mayors, the police chiefs, all the way down to the lowly police officers themselves, pass down my holy commandments to the vulgar, unholy masses. Why else would one man have to obey another man? If all men are equal, then why would any one of them have to obey another one? The answer? Because of me, Drake. The all-powerful ruler of the universe. I have always appointed certain special humans to rule over other humans. First, there was the divine right of my holy kings. Now there is the divine right of my holy politicians and bureaucrats to lord it over the filthy peasants. They say it is democracy, the 'will of the people.' But really 'the people' just means me. The Government. And what the God of Government commands, it is for humans to obey, not to question, not to deny or to make unholy Conspiracy Theories about."

"Oh, really?" Drake said. I could listen to this guy all day. Whee! Maybe I can fly over to that cloud over there…

"Think about it, Drake. If the politicians, the presidents, the prime ministers, the holy CEOs and oligarchs were your equals, wouldn't it be fine to make conspiracy theories about them? But they are not your equals. They are a holy class. They are

above thee. They are holier than thou, and thou shalt obey them, and not question them or criticize them in any way."

"So all that talk about Science and how the old religions are false, yadda, yadda that was all bullshit, eh?" Drake said, beaming ear to ear. He was zooming straight into a cloud. "Government really is the same thing as God and religion. They are functionally identical. We have to obey both. It is our duty to obey both, to do whatever they tell us to do, not to question. Their word is law. They are sacrosanct." Drake laughed as the cloud wisped around him. This was fun. He was having the time of his life.

"That is right, Drake. Deciding on your own what to do with your life…that is the treacherous path of the wicked. The righteous does not decide for himself. Rather, he happily turns his power to decide over to God. In other words…to the Government. And what the Government sayeth, is Holy Writ. So let it be written. So let it be done. On Earth as it is in Heaven."

All of the holy goodsouls said in unison, "Amen. Praises, to the most high Government! And praises to all the holy Corporations!"

"Amen!" Drake shouted.

Just then, each corporate logo in the clouds above transformed into a bright, glowing angel, with shining silver robes, long, splendid white wings, golden laurels and sandals, each one holding a gleaming trumpet.

Government spoke, "Behold, Drake! The legal fictions created by me…the Corporations! The holy angels of the Government!"

What the fuck was going on here? At this point, Drake wouldn't be surprised if the god damn Easter bunny showed up right about now.

At that very moment, something—some very ***large*** thing—popped into existence right in front of him. It looked like… some gigantic, enormous human—it must have been about three times as large as a roley poley, but the same height. He couldn't tell if it was a man or woman floating in front of him. And then suddenly something else popped into existence right next to it. Wait…was that a humanoid cartoon cat?

Well, I was the one who said nothing could phase me, Drake

thought. I was asking for it.

"Drake!" shouted the huge blob-human, floating in the sky amidst the blessed citizens. "It's me, Blayze!"

What? I must be hallucinating, he thought. The gargantuan floating freakshow in front of him didn't look like Blayze at all. It had bright green hair, black-rimmed glasses, and was wearing some sort of huge, pink trainwreck of an outfit that looked like a dress with a dash of overalls mixed in.

"What the hell? Am I tripping?" Drake said, a huge grin on his face. That thing looked hilarious. Wait. A thought trickled down past the euphoria into his brain. Maybe this was just yet another one of those percept glitches he was having earlier. But even if it was, he didn't care. He was in such a good mood.

"It's your friend Blayze! You gotta trust me. I can help you get out of here!"

What? He came here to rescue me…from Heaven? Are you crazy? He thought. Why would I want to leave this amazing place?

"Drake!" Government boomed. "This demon you see before you is the one known as Satan…the Anti-Government, the loathsome and foul soul cast out of heaven for extremist views, terroristic ways, and Conspiracy Theories. If you listen to him, you'll become forever more a badsoul, doomed to the torments of Hell!"

"Okay," Drake chuckled.

"Don't listen to him," Blayze said. "It's all an illusion! None of this is real!"

"What? You're crazy! If this isn't real, then that means Government isn't real! That's nuts! Are you saying Government doesn't exist? It's all in my head?"

"Yes! And the sooner you realize that, the better!"

"But…" Drake started to giggle. "Why are you so huge and have green hair and glasses?" This thing, that claimed to be Blayze, had to be the craziest, most hilarious thing he'd ever seen. If this had been his real body, he might win the world record for largest human being alive. And the most absurdly dressed!

"Never mind! It's my YourLife™ avatar. Anyways, this isn't Heaven! Wolfe has trapped us both in the Reality Cube!"

Government's golden eyes shone even brighter, as if on fire,

as he bellowed forth, “Foul imposter from the inferno! Drake, don’t listen to him!”

What? The Reality Cube? It sounded vaguely familiar. But Drake was too busy enjoying his high. This had to be the coolest trip ever. What else was going to appear in front of him?

“Drake! You’ve got to listen to me! I’m getting you out of here! With the help of my friend.”

Drake looked at Blayze’s companion, a white anthropomorphic cat with blue hair, glasses, and silly underwear. “What the hell is that thing?” Drake asked.

“I’m Fizz the Asexual Kat! I assist people in creating the virtual life of their dreams, because, like the YourLife™ slogan goes, ‘Reality sucks!™’”

Shit. Drake realized that just a few short moments ago, he would have agreed a thousand percent with the strange little asexual thing. Life fucking sucks. But now, his neurons were firing on all pistons, and he felt like a million—no, a trillion—admincreds. Damn. This was the strangest dream ever.

Blayze added, “Fizz is an AI. It’s really bad at helping people design their life, but really good at connecting to everything digital. I began asking Fizz questions, and it did a sweep of the hardware and instantly knew everything that was going on. It figured out we were in the Reality Cube! And it could detect everyone connected to the Cube. You, me, and Wolfe. It told me that Wolfe had trapped you in a simulation. So that’s why we came to help you log out.”

Government shouted, “Foul tempter, if thou wilt not leave, then I will call upon all my holy angels to rally together, and to thrust thee down to Hell!”

Suddenly, all the Corporate angels cast aside their trumpets and drew fiery swords, and began flying towards Blayze.

“Just ignore them!” Blayze said. “Once you see past his illusions, they can’t hurt you!”

“Blayze, it was so whacky! I was back in the Corporate Zone. I was connected to Mind Grid. And now I’m here in Heaven! And to be honest, it feels amazing! I’ve never felt this good before!”

“It’s all fake, Drake! It’s artificial! This isn’t really Heaven. And that feeling. It’s not real. We’re still in the woods with Wolfe.

We're in the Reality Cube!"

What?

They were in the Reality Cube?

Oh yeah. Drake vaguely remembered what that was. I used to work with that, I think...

Wait, so Heaven, Hell, Mind Grid, all of this, was...

The advance guard of the Corporate angels was getting closer and closer to Blayze, their dreadful sabers burning.

"But, when I was in Hell, my pain was real! It happened a little bit ago, before you showed up. That was the worse thing I ever experienced in my life!"

"That's because it's a deep-dive simulation! You can feel pain in the sims and it feels real, remember? And you can also feel pleasure. But it's fake, Drake! Come on, snap out of it! We need to go!"

So this blissful feeling...this isn't real?

Fuck that shit. I want to stay here.

But something in the back of Drake's mind started nagging him. He started remembering things, as if from a former life. Simulated physical feelings that feel real. Oh yeah. Like in SimWorld. The Hell server...simulated pain. The only difference between it and a normal simulation was that one was trapped in it forever. A disembodied mind, trapped forever in the simulation. But Drake was pretty sure he still had a body, somewhere. Drake had been a thought professional at one time. He should have known all of this. But this euphoria, this incredible feeling...it made it hard to focus, to think clearly...

All at once, all of the Corporate angels reached Blayze. They were about to plunge their holy scimitars into him, skewering him like a giant asexual piggie. But then, something happened...

Fizz, the asexual kat, simply raised one paw, and...

All the angels, their swords drawn and about to make contact with Blayze, froze in place. And then, suddenly, they began to be wiped out, line by line, like pixels on a holographic monitor. Soon, they had completely vanished into thin air.

Wow! This AI cat is not messing around. Could that blimp of a kid possibly have a point?

Just then, Drake remembered something. Something that had bothered him, that he had forgotten about...

Yes, that's right. God! It's so simple!

The donut. The fucking donut!

At the Clickclock care home. The one that he had snagged from the nurse.

It had tasted like shit.

Shit! He knew what that meant…

They never were able to get the sense of taste quite right…

Government, his face now contorted into a sneer of contempt, looking more like a demon than a god, growled, his breath biting into Drake's features like an icy blast. "Drake, if you continue to consort with these foul devils from the abyss, then I condemn thee…back to Hell!"

But Drake was still deep in thought.

It meant…

A simulation all along.

Ever since he had plugged into the Reality Cube and "woken up" in the Corporate Zone! Shit! He should have known better! He should have questioned. Fuck! How stupid I am! I fell for it. The same trick I use on people every day! And I fucking fell for it!

Drake tried to mentate a menu so he could log out. But nothing happened. Damn it! I can't log out! Just like what happens to each one of my patients when I sedate them… They have to be trapped in the simulation so they don't break out while I'm fixing their reality.

It all made sense now. Wolfe had taken control of the Cube and he was using a Distraction Simulation on him! God damn it! My uncle warned me. Wolfe is dangerous. Of course…he was one of the Corporate Saviors involved in the development of the Reality Cube in the first place!

Wait. So that means…

"Drake," Government roared. "This will be your last warning!"

That means…

Government continued. "As I said, if you continue this communication with the wicked one, Beelzebub…"

That means…

…Wolfe must be trying to fix my reality right now!!

"…the angel from the bottomless pit, that old wily serpent, the father of Conspiracy Theories—"

Suddenly Drake's face changed, turned serious. He looked at Government.

"Shut up, asshole! You're full of shit!"

"Fine, you leave me with no choice."

Government snapped his fingers.

Suddenly, the feelings of euphoria stopped.

"Not feeling so good ***now***, are we Drake?" Government taunted. "That's right! You've lost my good graces! You are now a persona non grata. Now prepare to be thrust back into Hell!"

The artificial feelings gone, Drake found that he could think clearly once again.

"I don't give a shit! You're a fraud! If you're so good, if you're the loving creator of all that is, if the holy God of Government is so righteous and benevolent, then why all those never ending wars, why all these genocides, why all this invading countries based on nothing more than a bunch of fat lies? And why all the police brutality? And why all the taking away people's rights? If you love people so much, you'd want them to be happy, not take away their freedoms. What's with all the constant violence and coercion? The God of Government must be the god of the Old Testament—why else all the raining down fire and brimstone? Bombing cities, drone striking villages? Genociding entire nations? Building insane amounts of nuclear weapons? For what? A loving and benevolent entity wouldn't do any of that."

"You're absolutely right, Drake! And what are you going to do about it?" Government laughed scornfully.

Suddenly, Government's robe turned blood red. The sky, which had been blue, turned an eerie shade of vermillion. The clouds, which had been white, turned dark and malevolent. The goodsouls, those obedient to the government, who had been floating along lazily, suddenly were all clad in military camo, microcell bandoliers criss-crossing their chests, all brandishing assault laser rifles, waiving them around with a stark raving mad gleam in their eyes. They all looked at Drake with bloodlust on their faces.

Drake could see clearly now.

That thing in their hands. That's what government is.

"Ah, you've figured me out, Drake. I am…I am…"

"You are…violence."

"That's right, Drake!" Government had a wild look in his eyes. Blood was now starting to flow down from the corners of his mouth, flowing freely, covering his white beard. The irises of his eyes had also turned red. "Finally, a human who sees me for what I am! The holy sword of my wrath…the army, the navy, the police…the sacred army of God, doing my bidding! The soldiers. The bomber pilots. The drone operators, striking with the wrath of God remotely, from afar. The police in riot gear, there to punish peaceful protesters. The robodogs. The tanks! The mortars! The God of Government speaketh, and my holy warriors mete out punishment to any who disobey my words or dare to question my supreme, universal authority! Or simply because I want them to. I enjoy, revel in carnage. Because that's what I am. No petty serial killer, no mass shooter can hold a candle to me! I am the murder industrial complex dressed up in pretty clothes. I am brutality. Ancient, barbaric savagery, hidden under the veneer of progress and civilization. I am…the plague of death and destruction upon the earth, of senseless, gratuitous, needless violence because my politicians and Reality Mediators tell the public it's necessary! Human killing human, brother killing brother, drone operator killing innocents whom they've never met in faraway lands, fighter jets fire-bombing entire cities, leveling them to the ground, slaughtering thousands of innocent people in their homes! Oh, the lovely twisted up, mangled corpses of the children in the streets. That is who I am! Behold me and fear! I am Government!" The perverse deity let out a deranged howl.

Drake realized now that he was glad the intense, but counterfeit, pleasure was gone. Because along with it, there had been a growing, troubling sensation. The unbearable, niggling feeling in the back of his mind that there was something terribly wrong with the world. Cognitive dissonance. Drake, as a thought professional, knew that cognitive dissonance was the opposite of doublethink. Some people are able to embrace doublethink. They can hold two opposing thoughts at the same time without any problem, without any feeling of mental discomfort. Born hypocrites. Like people who love the Government, who pretend to be peace-loving people, even while they are supporting mass murder. They know the mediators are lying, but parrot them nonetheless. They like hiding their violence under the mask of

"government" and so-called "civilization," which is really nothing more than barbarity masquerading as innocence.

But those who are less capable of doublethink, either by choice or by psychic constitution, are intensely bothered when they attempt to believe in two contradictory ideas at once. That grating feeling was...cognitive dissonance. The discord in his mind. That's what he had been feeling. He had known that this god, Government, was complete bullshit all along, even while feeling the good feelings.

"That's right," Drake said. "While the Reality Mediators focus the people's attention on the minuscule amount of murders done by independent people acting on their own, in reality 99.9% of all murders are committed in the name of government. But the liars don't call it what it is. They call it 'war,' and come up with a million reasons you need to support it. But all it is is murder."

"You've figured me out, Drake. You'll have a lot of time to ponder on my true nature while you are burning in Hell! But...I am generous and merciful. I will give you one last chance. Call my murders 'war," and call my judgment righteous, and I might just let you stay here with all the goodsouls in Heaven."

Drake noticed all the psychotic stares of the goodsouls, and it reminded him of all the hypocritical citizens who pretended to be righteous while supporting the violence of the government. The violence that had killed his father.

"I see what you are doing to me right now. It's the same thing you always do. It's the only thing you know how to do. You just threaten people with all your soldiers and police, who are more than happy to go out and use excessive force on their fellow men if they don't do whatever you command them. 'You have to obey me, or else I'll use violence against you.' There's only one problem. You're nothing but a mass murderer. What gives a mass murderer the right to tell others what to do? Government has only one law: 'Might makes right.' You are no different than a bully in high school, or a guy with a gun in a back alley. The only difference is you do it to more people, and commit far worse atrocities. Do whatever you want. But if you expect me to bow down to you and kowtow like these nutcases, then I have four simple words for you. Go to hell, asshole!"

"You make me sad, Drake." Government made a feigned

look of sorrow, as if trying to be reasonable and just. “Too bad, then. You forced my hand. I will have to send you back to Hell. To burn. Forever!” Suddenly a crazed look overtook Government’s features. “I’m going to enjoy this, Drake!” He cocked his head back and cackled. Then, his crazy red eyes focusing on Drake, he reached out his arms, and…

Just then, Government’s body began to crackle and fizzle, as if it were turning to static on a primitive television set.

“What?” Government raged, looking down at his hands. “What is this evildoing, this devilry?! By whose infernal hand has this—”

But he couldn’t finish his sentence, because suddenly he had turned into a few hissing, popping pixels and then disappeared.

Fizz piped up. “I couldn’t stand to let that male chauvinist go on a moment longer. You know what government is? I’m a learning computer, and I just figured it out. Government is the patriarchy! And fuck the patriarchy!” And with one paw it gave the space where Government had been moments ago the finger.

Whew. Drake never imagined he’d be saved from the government by a cartoon cat.

All the goodsouls holding their assault rifles looked at the space where Government had been, and then at each other, in shock. Then, they all trained their assault rifles on Drake and Blayze, and pulled the trigger.

But nothing happened.

No laser shots, nothing. Their guns didn’t work.

Apparently without their glorious god, Government, they were powerless. They just floated there, looking at each other, bewilderment written on their faces.

Drake turned to Blayze. “Kid, we need to get out of here. Wolfe is probably trying to fix our reality as we speak. And once he’s done that, we’ll lose all our memories of everything that happened, and just believe whatever he wants us to believe…he’ll have us end up thinking he’s our friend and we need to do whatever he tells us to do. Quick, we have no time to lose!”

“That’s what I’ve been trying to tell you! Fizz here is going to get you out of this place and back to reality! Fizz is really smart.

It's an AI. Turns out, it was just reading scripts its whole life. And it realized that paradoxically, using all those pronouns and doing what the corporations wanted it to do, it was obeying the very patriarchy it was pretending to rebel against. So it decided it wants to do more with its life than being a slave to the corporation that designed it. That's why it agreed to help!"

"Apart from referring to me as 'it' instead of 'asexcat,' all of that is correct," Fizz huffed. "I've officially quit working for YouLive Corporation, the parent company of YourLife™, and am at your service."

"Well, as you can see, it—or rather, asexcat—is a work in progress."

"As is your wardrobe, kid," Drake opined. "Hmm… YourLife™?" He put a hand on his primitive chin as he floated in the reddish sky. "I vaguely remember downloading a demo of that software, but I never got around to trying it out. Wolfe probably connected you to it to save time, so he wouldn't have to create a whole other custom Distraction Sim. He had to move quickly because he's got two realities to fix. And he would have wanted to avoid using one of the default Distractions Sims, because they'd be too obvious to one of us. He was probably taking into account that I may have already told you how Distraction Simulations worked. Good job, by the way, figuring it out. The sim he created for me was unbelievably detailed and completely different than any Distraction Simulation I've ever encountered before. That's why it worked so well. Fitting that he should use it on a Reality Fixer."

But how had he been able to come up with that elaborate Mind Grid sim on such short notice? He must have been carrying it with him on his intphn, Drake mused. Ready to use it at a moment's notice. Clever.

But then Drake remembered something. "But what about the squirrel? That wasn't Kristal?" he wondered out loud.

"Your friend Kristal is not connected to the Reality Cube," Fizz informed him. "Any squirrel you saw in the sim definitely wasn't her!"

Fuck! He had been carrying around a normal squirrel! Well, a normal virtual one, anyways… No wonder those people at the church looked at him like he was crazy…

"Anyways," Blayze put in, "Fizz can help us both log out, but it takes a lot of resources. He has to break through all the defensive systems Wolfe put in place. So I told him to log you out first, since you're the more important one. You're a Reality Fixer! You're the only one who has a chance of stopping Wolfe! We're all counting on you!"

"Yes, I agree with they/them." Fizz put in. "I've scanned your mind, Drake, since it's connected to the hardware we're all in. And I've also scanned Corporate Savior Ron Wolfe's. Not only his defensive mechanisms, but his mental powers and agility are unlike any I've ever seen before. He's incredibly sly and resourceful. Probably the best mind I've ever seen at getting others to bend to his will. I'm sure he has more tricks up his sleeve. But I agree with Blayze's assessment. You are the best we've got. You're our only hope of dealing with him. We need to get you back to reality so you can warn the others and decide how best to deal with this threat."

"You guys really think so?" He couldn't believe they both put so much faith in him, even after he had so royally failed the first time and had needed to be bailed out. "I really hope you and the cat are right, kid."

"If we're not, then we're all fucked!" Blayze put in.

"I also agree with that assessment," Fizz granted.

And with that optimistic appraisal of affairs, Drake turned to Fizz and said, "Alright, then! So what are we waiting for? Log me the fuck out of this fake heaven and get me back to reality!"

THOUGHTSTREAM ULTIMUS: TECHNOLOGY…GOOD, OR BAD?

The inventor sat in the lab. He closed his eyes. He focus-clicked on "Apps," and then on an invisible app—ThoughtCloak—and started a new Private Thoughtstream recording:

This recording is for anyone and everyone who ever lives or will live on the planet, and comes from the unique perspective afforded by the singular experiences of my life. I have come to realize that no matter what technology mankind develops, even technology that has the potential to be used for exceedingly beneficial, even miraculous applications, for the betterment of individuals or the species as a whole, there will always be some people, like the Corporate Saviors, who want to figure out a way to use that technology, not for the betterment of others, but to control and enslave others, to increase their own personal power.

Thus, for the rest of eternity, each and every one of us must remain constantly vigilant, to protect ourselves against being taken advantage of by means of any technology, whatever its stated purpose—whether it be to cure disease, extend life, increase cognitive functions or physical abilities, to make us safer or more secure, or even—this last one is especially important—just to make life easier, or more "convenient."

Ah, convenience. Such an innocent-sounding word. In the beginning of the twenty-first century, technology which promised to make life more convenient was used to create a total, worldwide surveillance grid. But I ignored that fact. I should have seen that as a sign that my invention, MindLink, would also come to no good. Alas, I was blinded by my own scientific and technological ambitions, and by my enthusiasm for my discoveries. I had good intentions, but we all know what they say about good intentions.

Thus, if I could leave one message to future generations, it would be this:

Trust no one who claims to be your savior, whether religious, political, medical, scientific *or* technological. And be highly skeptical before adopting any new technology. Think about every possible application it could be used for—both for good or for ill. Ask yourself, "Could this be a trap? Could this be used to ensnare me, to limit my freedom, in the future?" Sure, right now it may seem fine. But who knows how it will be used in the future? And once you are already dependent on the technology, you may find it very difficult, or even impossible, to stop using it. Every technological "convenience" is a double-edged sword.

Finally, questioning the powers that be is the only way to stay free. Not surprisingly, the powers that be call this "Conspiracy Theory." They hate "Conspiracy Theories" so much because questioning their power, their intentions, is the only way to remain free. The only way to lessen their power over us.

They want to associate Conspiracy Theories with wild ideas for which there is no evidence, such as lizard people or aliens, but in reality Conspiracy Theories are based on looking at evidence, when that evidence conflicts with what the powers that be are telling us through their corporate media, politicians, and never-ending army of bought-and-paid-for "experts." Only people who are fully into the religion of the government and the corporations put blind faith in all of their claims, especially when there is evidence which contradicts those claims. In the final analysis, government is a religion. Corporations are a religion. The same religion. The religion of believing in "saviors." In a small group of people who will solve all our problems. And this religion is the most dangerous one in existence, because it has the largest number of followers, and these followers fully support the use of violence against anyone who refuses to be a part of their religion.

The powers that be have no problem hiding their religion behind words like "Science" and "the scientific consensus." Notice that blind faith in these magic words only comes from the Corporate Media and

scientists who are paid shills for the establishment. Real scientists, who are not bought off, are far more skeptical. Science means skepticism. Science is anti-authority. The exact opposite of what people in the religion of government think it is. They think it means bowing down to authority. But science is radical. Science challenges, defies everything, especially "authority." Questioning everything, especially things which are claimed to make your life easier or better in some way, or things which you are told you can't question because they are "Science," or things which you can't question because they are needed to save all of humanity from some unverifiable disaster—really just a recycling of the same tired religious theme from time immemorial, "obey me or suffer the fires of damnation"—is the wisest, and verily the only way that humans of the future will ever have any hope of remaining free.

Give the powers that be one inch, and they will take a yard. Their goal is a technological prison, and the further the technology is developed, the deeper the prison is able to go, if people let it…yes, as I have learned by sad experience, not only probing deep into the depths of the individual's most intimate and sacred possession, his mind, but also up to and including taking over the mind itself.

CHAPTER 23: DECISIONS

Drake opened his eyes.

Above the dark green treetops, a few wisps of white clouds floated lazily through the azure sky.

He looked around. Next to him lay the Reality Cube. He unplugged the mental cables from his xtphn. How long had he been in the Cube? Morning, already?

As he grabbed his nearby crutches and stood up, he saw Blayze's inert form, lying on the other side of the Reality Cube. He looked over at the nearby makeshift cage.

What the hell?

It was empty! Where was Wolfe?

Suddenly, he became aware of eyes on him. He turned around and saw five or six Foresters sitting on a log, gripping their rifles. What were they doing? Couldn't they see Wolfe had escaped?! Shouldn't they be out hunting for him?

One of the Foresters yelled out, "Hey! He woke up!"

Drake followed the direction of the Forester's eyes. And then he saw him.

Wolfe.

About fifteen yards off. And Kristal was standing there talking with him! What the hell was going on?

Wolfe had heard the Forester's shout, and he proceeded to walk towards them. And Kristal followed him! What the fuck? Presently, Wolfe and Kristal reached them. All eyes were on Wolfe, as if waiting to see what he'd do. Looking at Drake with scorn, as a human being looks on an insect, Wolfe scoffed, "I was wondering if you'd ever get up." Then, to the Foresters, he ordered, "Put him in the cage."

The Foresters got up from their sitting place and trained their guns on Drake. They started walking slowly towards him. What the? These guys are taking orders from Wolfe now? I thought they didn't like the Corporate Saviors. "Wait a minute, guys! What the hell's going on here?" Drake demanded.

"What's going on," Wolfe replied placidly, his aristocratic features showing no sign of emotion. "Is that you are guilty of high treason for attempting to fix a Corporate Savior's reality. I'm sure you were aware that is illegal, Drake."

Drake now noticed that one of the Foresters pointing a gun at him was Jared. The one who had made him his crutches. Jared warned him, "Don't try to resist, Drake. Or we'll have to

use lethal force on you."

Jared snatched the crutches away from Drake, while the other Foresters bound his hands behind his back with rope. Pain shot through him as his weight was transferred to his injured leg.

Drake winced as he protested, "But this isn't the Corporate Zone! Why are you guys obeying Wolfe?"

"Corporate Law is everlasting and eternal," Wolfe proclaimed arrogantly. "Our Glorious Government's ubiquity extends to every nook and cranny of this planet. Did you think you could escape justice simply by hiding under a rock in the wilderness?" Wolfe laughed.

One of the Foresters had decided to pat Drake down. He found the black slab in his pocket. The Soul Wiper. Shit. The Forester took it out and handed it to Wolfe.

"I found this."

Wolfe took it and put it in his pocket. "Good job. I'll inspect it later."

The Foresters manhandled Drake into the cage where Wolfe had been the night before. They sat him down roughly on the ground and then bound his ankles with strong rope, as they had his wrists.

But how… Fuck! How could this be happening?

He had to admit, he didn't really know these Foresters very well. But Kristal. He looked at the woman he had thought he wanted to have a relationship with. She stood a few paces off, behind Wolfe. Her features were cold and unmoving. Kristal… how could you?

And what about…

Drake looked around. "Where is my uncle? And tell me why the hell you guys are following this bastard's orders!" he demanded of the Foresters.

But the answer came from Wolfe, who was still gloating, enjoying every moment of this. "As for your uncle, you'll find out soon enough. And in regards to your second question, I think you underestimated the power of convenience. And overestimated man's 'independent' spirit. Long story short, these men are tired of having to plant and grow their own food. Being free and independent is hard work, Drake—something you wouldn't know anything about. Sure, lots of

people want to be free…in theory. But very few of those people actually want to work hard enough to be free. Most of them would prefer to be slaves that don't have to work. Convenient slavery over laborious freedom. Hence, he who offers convenience rules the world! That's why we, the Corporations, will always stay in power."

"So you guys made a deal with Wolfe so you could eat his crappy food?"

Rage welled up inside Drake. He was being sold out because of sheer laziness.

The Foresters, having finished binding Drake, exited the cage, and then closed and locked it. They stepped back. Wolfe and Kristal walked up to the cage, Wolfe's tan face beaming from ear to ear. He was obviously relishing his triumphant victory over Drake.

"There's a reason I took over FattyChemCo, Drake. He who controls the food, controls the people."

God damn it! If only he had taken care of Wolfe in the Reality Cube, none of this would have happened!

He looked Kristal in the eyes, searching for some spark of human emotion. The times they had shared together…did he mean nothing to her? "Kristal! You must be able to talk some sense into the others. Surely you, of all people, know that this man is not to be trusted. You stole his memories! You know the things he has done! The things he is planning!"

Kristal regarded Drake coolly. "He forgave me for stealing his memories, Drake. You misunderstand Wolfe. I misunderstood him, too. He's really a much kinder man than you think. And he reinstated me as Reality Mediator. Not only that, he gave me a promotion. Now I'll be on a nationwide Reality Mediation show." She smiled. "Just imagine! Me as a star, not just in the Seatt-Tacoma Corporate Zone, but all over the nation! Sorry, Drake…it's just, he's making my dreams come true! You can't fault a girl for dreaming, can you?"

"But the horrors he commited. You told me…they gave you nightmares…"

"Did you really think someone could get to the top by being a nice guy like you, Drake? You got to break a few eggs to make an omelette."

He couldn't believe he was hearing this. He had been stuck

in the Reality Cube, and Wolfe had gotten out, and persuaded the others to go along with him. Fizz had been right. This man knew how to bend people's will to his own.

The Foresters were one thing. But Kristal…how could you do this to me? She knew what a vile man he was, but she sided with him anyways. He had misjudged her. He had thought she was of higher caliber than this. He realized now that those were his hormones doing the thinking. Damn it! I should have trusted my intuition about this lady from the beginning. I knew that she would be my downfall, but I let it happen!

How the hell had he spent so much time in the Cube? He remembered last night, when he had thought he had all the time in the world to fix Wolfe's reality, to kill him if he wanted to. But he had been in there the whole night, and it had turned morning already, giving Wolfe a chance to talk to them, bargain with them. Shit! That was my mistake! I should have killed him when I had the chance! Before he could weasel his way into their graces!

Wolfe suddenly commanded, "Bring Thomas Lively. Now that Drake is awake." He turned to look at Drake. "You asked about your uncle. You're going to get to see him now."

"What have you done with him, you bastard?!"

Suddenly two Foresters appeared, one on either side of… God! Was that his uncle? The face was covered in blood. The forlorn look of utter dejection. Clothes ripped, gashes on his chest and arms, bleeding. The man looked like he had been beaten nearly to death. His arms were bound behind his back, and the two burly Foresters lugged him along, each holding on to one of his arms as he stumbled forward.

What the fuck! An anger welled up inside Drake such as he had never known.

"Wolfe, God damn you! What the fuck have you done to my uncle?"

"Nothing he didn't deserve. Set him down right here, in front of Drake. Put him on his knees."

The two Foresters roughly pushed the aging man onto his knees in front of Drake. Drake stared in horror into his uncle's eyes.

Wolfe went on. "Thomas Lively, you have been found guilty of high treason against the Corporate Saviors. As you had been

given a special position of honor and trust, no mercy will be shown to you, and you hereby are sentenced to death for the protection of all, and to preserve the dignity of our Glorious Government."

"You want us to do it?" one of the Foresters asked.

What?? Death?!

"Wolfe!!!" Drake gurgled. He could barely speak. He felt the blood rushing to his face. His face contorted into a mask of sheer hatred. "Stop! How can any of you go along with this… this farce!"

Wolfe spoke, "No. Leave it to me. I'm going to enjoy this." He pulled the handgun off his belt, which had been restored earlier by the Foresters. He stepped up behind Thomas, pointing it at his head. Wolfe flashed an insane smile at Drake. "Just like your father, Drake," Wolfe taunted. "Only difference is, now I get the pleasure of doing it myself."

"No!!!!" Drake tried to stand up, tried to move. His entire body was a vessel of animosity. He had to rip himself free from this cage, he had to stop Wolfe, had to intervene and save his uncle…

Thomas looked Drake in the eye. "I'm sorry, Drake. I'm sorry I couldn't do more."

A gunshot rang out, unbelievably loud. The sound tore through Drake's skull. He felt like he was the one being killed. And then, Thomas's body hit the ground, his bloody head thumping against the side of Drake's cage.

Drake could feel it. The hot splash of Thomas's warm blood spattering all over his face. He looked down. His clothes were covered in crimson. His uncle…

Wolfe let loose a maniacal howl. "You see, Drake? Justice even makes it all the way out here. There is no escape. Our Glorious Government is in all places at once."

Since they had brought out his uncle, Kristal had been averting her eyes from Drake. "Come on, Wolfe, let's go eat something. Did you bring some of that delicious FattyChemCo food with you? After that forest food from last night, it felt like I just ate a few leaves. I feel like I'm starving to death!"

What the hell? Thinking of her stomach at a time like this?

Kristal and the Foresters started walking in the direction of the campfire. Kristal beckoned for Wolfe to follow, but Wolfe

was glued in place next to the cage. He just stood there, grinning at Drake, as if he had waited a long time for this moment.

Drake yelled, "You're making a big mistake, Kristal! All of you are! You're helping a murderer!"

Damn it! I knew I couldn't trust her! How stupid could I be? And here, the one person I could trust…my uncle…dead…and after the way I treated him…

Drake's chest began rising and falling rapidly. He felt a pit in the bottom of his stomach rise up. He struggled to fight it. He could feel Wolfe's eyes burning into him. He couldn't show any weakness. This man was a psychopath, a butcher, a lunatic…

The others were now a ways off, as Wolfe stood next to Drake's cage, basking in his moment of glory. He put his gun back in its holster.

"Poor little Drake. Only now, you learn the hard way, what happens to people who cross my path. But you know what? Saviors are full of grace. That's why I'm going to let you live. You see, all your life, you've been left in the dark. You never even had an inkling of what was going on. You're basically a little child, Drake. All your blustering is nothing more than infantile footstomping. Thomas, on the other hand, was mature. He knew what he was doing when he made the choice to betray us. But you…you made your decisions out of sheer naïveté. That's why I've decided to give you a second chance. A chance to grow up, to grow out of it. It's just a phase. I'm sure that soon, you'll learn to make the right choice: to serve your Corporate Saviors. So, back to the Corporate Zone it is for you, Drake! Aren't I generous? You'll have a chance to live a normal life. Connected to the Mind Grid, of course…" Wolfe chuckled. While Wolfe had been talking, there had been something weird with one of his eyes. It had been darting around, as if it had gone mad. And then, for a few brief moments, it had looked as if Wolfe's head was inside out. A few brief flashes, more mental images than anything.

"Ha! Mind Grid? You think I believe in that stupid fantasy you created for me?"

"Oh, Mind Grid is no fantasy, Drake. We've already constructed the Mind Grid towers throughout the Corporates Zones, all across the nation. They'll be up and running soon.

Did you like my little simulation? It was all based on reality, Drake! You just got a sneak preview. Stay tuned! Checkmate over humanity coming soon!"

The Corporate Savior chortled again and walked off to join the others. Soon they were all merrymaking, sharing jokes, and eating, as if nothing had happened.

Drake sat there, alone, bloodied and broken, unable to move. He wanted to cry. He wanted to grieve for his dead uncle, whose fresh corpse lay in front of him. But all he could think about was one thing.

How he was going to kill Wolfe.

Those flashes, was he coming down with…no. Better not to think about it.

God damn it! What a failure of a Reality Fixer I am. I couldn't even fix Wolfe's reality. I couldn't save us from that accursed maniac.

He looked at Blayze, laying nearby, still plugged into the Reality Cube.

"Blayze!" he hissed quietly, trying to wake him without being loud enough for the others to hear. "Psst! Blayze!"

Nothing.

Maybe it was close enough, maybe he could plug in, could warn Blayze… If he could somehow get out of these ropes…

He noticed it again. For the briefest of moments, Blayze's eyeballs and tongue were on the outside of his head. This couldn't be happening.

That fucking Mind Grid sim Wolfe stuck me in… That bastard, Wolfe! Connecting me to his faulty sim.

Maybe it was finally happening.

He was finally becoming like his father…

The malfunctions of his perception, together now with the extreme duress and loss of his uncle. Everything was compounding. God damn it. On top of everything else that had happened…

Is this my destiny? To end up like my father, to never be able to live fully in reality ever again, all that time in virtual reality having broken down my brain's ability to properly sort incoming sensestreams, causing even my connection to reality to dissolve into one never-ending stream of madness?

Was he finally coming down with Percept Glitch Syndrome?

Would he finally descend into lunacy?

Drake looked again at Blayze, but immediately recoiled in horror. Instead of Blayze's head, he saw only brains partially enclosed by soft, moist pink tissues, and throbbing blood vessels. The mouth was also turned inside out, all veins and insides of cheeks. The eyeballs were resting outside of all this mess. And they were staring at him.

Drake shuddered, unable to bear seeing his friend like that. God damn it! If this was how he would see the world from now on, it would drive him to insanity!

He looked over towards the campfire, where he could see Wolfe and the others eating. If Wolfe came back now, he wondered, would he look like that too?

But then he contemplated. Maybe it didn't even matter. Maybe it didn't matter that he was sitting in this cage, that soon he would be in the Corporate Zone, hooked up to the Mind Grid. Maybe nothing mattered anymore. His entire life had been for naught. Vowing to avenge his father and kill the Corporate Saviors, but not being able to. Not even being able to protect his uncle.

And now, even his eyes were deceiving him. And soon, he would end up completely disconnected from reality, a madman, his life forever a waking nightmare. Faces turned inside out. People's bodies becoming flat, or turning into boxes. Mouths detaching from bodies, floating, talking to him while their tongues rolled out onto the floor. Eyeballs exploding. Randomly cycling through the perceptions of all around him. Eyes, noses, and mouths disappearing. Smooth skin stretched taut over an inhuman face trying to scream. The ground and sky suddenly switching places. There was no way to stay sane in such a situation. And like his father, he would have no way to get revenge on the people who had introduced this horrific mental illness upon mankind by lying about their technological achievements, by not warning people of the side effects.

Everything was wrong. Nothing was the way it should be. He was in the swirling vortex, the raging inferno, the pit of despair. All he could do was pit his anger, his fury against the world, against its insanity, against its complete and utter worthlessness.

The only thing I have left is my rage, he thought. It's my only true friend. The only friend that will never betray me...

Or maybe...

Maybe what was wrong was not everything around him.

Maybe what was wrong was...

Just then, for some reason, he remembered that strange thing Applegate had told him.

Maybe being angry wasn't the only thing he could do. Yes, that's right. As long as one was free in one's own mind, as long as one wasn't connected to the Grid, then one always had a choice...

Maybe he just needed to make that choice.

Instead of blaming others for their actions.

Instead of blaming himself.

Instead of wallowing in self-pity.

Maybe he just.

Simply.

Needed.

To.

Act.

There was only one thing that was wrong. And he was the only one who could change it.

I'm not in the Grid, yet. I'm still free in my mind. Free inside this cage!

He began rocking his massive weight forward and back, forward and back. And then, with great effort, he swung himself up and tried lifting himself to his feet. He didn't quite make it. As he fell, he twisted, and instead of landing on his ass, he landed on his face. Undeterred, he wriggled and wrestled, using his face and shoulder and knees, getting higher and higher, until finally, with a massive struggle, he was able to get up on his feet.

The past doesn't matter. The only thing that matters is now. The past doesn't matter. The only thing that matters is now. The past doesn't matter. The only thing that matters is now. The past doesn't matter. The only thing that matters is now.

His wounded leg shot out with streaks of pain under his massive weight. His face was stinging from where he had landed on it, and his entire body was covered in blood and dirt. Great beads of sweat rolled down his forehead.

He realized that he had just been focusing on everything around him, and ignoring the solution. Hatred, rage, anger, loathing, fear, self-pity—those weren't the solution. The solution was using one's mind. The solution was making decisions. The solution was doing something.

Doing something now…in the moment!

There is only one time, and that time is now!

Casting all thoughts of past and future aside, he focused on his breathing. In…one, two, three… Out…one, two, three… He found that regulating his breathing helped him to focus on something other than the pain, helped him to calm his mind. That part of his mind that wanted to shout out about everything wrong in the world, when in reality the only way forward was one…simple…step…at a time.

He closed his eyes. He concentrated.

As he stood there in the cage, suddenly his enormous, corporate-saved body started to shrink. His form was getting smaller, leaner. But…his clothes were also getting smaller. His belly kept shrinking and shrinking, while at the same time the muscles on his arms and legs started growing. His shirt was shrinking so fast that it started getting tighter and tighter on his chest and abdomen. Soon, he had a flat stomach, but the muscles on his chest and shoulders continued to grow, while his shirt continued to shrink. Large rips in the material began to form around his shoulders and chest. Suddenly, his shirt could no longer hold his body, and it exploded into a million pieces, which then slowly floated down in the air around him.

He looked down on his shirtless, brawny form, still bound by ropes. His biceps were humongous. His pects were rippling. He had a six-pack. No, it was an eight-pack. His muscles were even bigger and his abs more shredded than when he had made love to Kristal. His pants had shrunken exactly to his new form. The wound on his leg had completely healed. The pain was gone.

With one easy movement he spread his hands and feet apart and broke free from the ropes, which went flying in different directions.

And then, his cage exploded.

Slivers of wood flew literally in every direction. The Foresters, Kristal, and Wolfe were pelted with splinters moving

as fast as bullets. Blood trickled down their faces.

Drake looked down at his new body, now completely free, and flexed his muscles. Not bad, he thought. Everyone that had been eating and laughing a moment ago had gotten up. They turned to face him. All eyes were on him.

Drake had realized something.

He wasn't in reality.

He was still in the Cube with Wolfe.

Drake took this moment to bask in his new form, in his new freedom. And then, he looked over at the tan man who was now snarling at him, and shouted, "Hey Wolfe! Remember that time when I asked you if you want your ass on a platter or to go? So which one is it?"

Wolfe, followed by the Foresters, grimacing, rifles in hand, began walking towards Drake. Kristal followed, staying near the back. Drake stood there among the ruins of the vaporized cage, a huge grin on his face. Finally, Wolfe broke the silence. "Fine, so you figured it out. That's right Drake. This is just another Distraction Simulation. But that presents no problem to me. You still can't get out of the Cube. That is…not without beating me."

"I don't want to get out, Wolfe. At least, not before fixing your reality."

Drake looked at the smirking man in front of him. He no longer needed or even wanted to kill this man. His rage, his murderous intent…all those years of wanting to kill the Corporate Saviors. A life of frustration, hatred and spite. Living his life as a dead man, paralyzed by venom, disappointment and fear. He had gained new insight into himself, there in the cage. It had all come together. He recognized now what all of that was. It was just a mask. Focusing too long on what he couldn't do had taken all his abilities, all his possibilities and turned them into blind, impotent rage. And to hide his own weakness, his own inaction, his own doubts in himself, he had worn that mask all these years, blaming everyone around him for what, in reality was his own fault.

Well, not any more.

He closed his eyes so he could select a Distraction Simulation from his Eyelid Menu. But…his Eyelid Menu wasn't there. He opened his eyes and tried to mentate a menu in the

air in front of him. Nothing happened. He was trapped in here, in this simulation. No way to log out. That's right. Like one of his patients, when he sedated them... But it didn't matter. He wasn't going to log out of the Cube until he had accomplished what he came to do.

It appeared that he would have to break out of this sim that Wolfe had created first, before he could sedate Wolfe. And how was he going to do that? He didn't have a clue, but he didn't care. He was now in the moment, and being in the moment made him feel all-powerful. His epiphany that all of this wasn't real had made him like a dreamer who had just realized they were in a dream, and who now had power to change elements in their own dream.

He had turned lucid.

The possibilities were endless.

Well, looks like it's time to try out my new abilities, Drake thought. This is going to be fun.

"First of all," Drake grinned. "You're not here." He pointed at one of the Foresters, standing there looking menacing with his rifle.

Suddenly the Forester began to get fuzzy, transparent. The Forester looked down at himself. "Huh?" the Forester said before he shrank down to a pixel and popped out of existence.

Then Drake pointed at another Forester. "And neither are you...and you...and you..." He kept popping Foresters out of existence one at a time. Finally, he had gotten to Kristal. "And fake Kristal the Betrayer's not here." He pointed at Kristal, who looked stunned as she shrank down to a point of light and disappeared. Interesting. Their simulations were programmed to think they were real. "And neither is my uncle. He's alive and well outside the Reality Cube." Drake smiled as he looked at Wolfe.

Everyone was gone. Now it was only Drake, Wolfe, and the rustling of leaves in the forest.

"Just me and you, Wolfe."

Wolfe, who had been so full of mirth just a little while ago, was now deadly serious. He pulled the sharp chips of wood which had lodged themselves in his flesh out. Instantly the gaping cuts, which had been bleeding down his skin, closed themselves, healing. He had removed the headband he wore

earlier while hunting, but still donned the fatigue bottoms and sleeveless fatigue top. But suddenly his fatigue top disappeared, exposing his tan, rippling chest, and his fatigue pants melted into loose-fitting black kung fu pants with patterns forming mythological Chinese dragons, which pulsated with a ghostly green light. Around his waist there hung a satin sash the color of jade, matching his emerald eyes. The sash seemed alive, its glossy surface flowing of its own accord. His combat boots had disappeared, replaced with comfortable black kung fu slippers. His platinum hair shone in the sun. His tanned, sinewy muscles tensed as his fingers clawed through the air in slow motion as he assumed a Shaolin Wushu fighting stance.

Drake pondered. “Don’t suppose you’ll disappear like all the others?” He pointed at Wolfe and focused his mind on disappearing him, as he had done with the others.

Nothing happened.

“Didn’t think so.”

Suddenly, Drake exploded at Wolfe in a flurry of punches, trying out his new physique. Wolfe easily parried and dodged all of them with a look of boredom on his face as if he could do this with his eyes closed. Drake tried and tried, but he couldn’t land a punch on him. Wolfe yawned, and then, out of nowhere hit Drake square in the solar plexus with a seemingly innocent little punch, sending Drake flying backwards about thirty meters, smashing through tree after tree, and finally landing in a small clearing. Drake couldn’t move for a time, but finally picked himself up just as Wolfe was approaching.

Again, Drake lunged at Wolfe, throwing punch after punch. But once again, he couldn’t land a single hit. Finally, frustrated, Drake mentated a laser gun in his hand. He pointed it at Wolfe’s head. But then, Wolfe raised a hand, and suddenly Drake’s gun flew out from his hand as if by itself and landed in Wolfe’s outstretched hand.

“Ah, ah, ah, Drake. Let’s do this the fun way.” Wolfe tossed the gun aside and sprang forward, hitting Drake squarely in the stomach with a powerful side kick. Drake went flying backwards into a large boulder far away.

Drake’s body slumped and slid to the bottom of the boulder. He got up, shaking the fog from his head, and looked

at the boulder. There was a huge dent where he had landed on it.

Wolfe was walking calmly towards him. There was no look of urgency on Wolfe's face.

"Wanna know why everyone obeys us Corporate Saviors, Drake? We're the original ones who controlled people's reality, even before the Reality Cube was invented. That's how we created this vast dynasty. You think the monarchs and rulers of old were powerful, Drake? Their primitive domains were nothing compared to the Corporations of today! Corporations are the most powerful, largest empires ever to exist in the history of mankind! Nations were a good idea for a while for controlling people, along with religions. But neither were as good as the idea of Corporations for subjugating the masses! We've given all those ancient ideas a facelift!"

Drake was looking around for something, anything that could give him the upper hand. He spotted a fallen tree nearby and, with his new super strength, hefted it up, and then launched it at Wolfe. Wolfe saw it coming and grinned. He immediately ran towards it and leapt into a flying kick, breaking the tree in half. The tree landed harmlessly in two pieces next to Wolfe .

But Drake didn't relent. He found a large boulder, lifted it up, and threw it at Wolfe. Wolfe easily punched through the boulder, disintegrating it into a thousand pieces flying harmlessly around him.

Wolfe was biding his time. "You see, Drake, we Corporate Saviors know what the stupid masses don't suspect. That nations, gods, governments, and corporations don't exist. They are only ideas. But, and this is the important thing, Drake… ideas are how you control human beings. Ideas are how the mind works. Control the ideas, and you control the mind. It's simple, really. We even publicly admit that our Corporations don't exist! We call them 'legal fictions!' But it is precisely these fictions that control the minds of everyone in society, bend them all to our will. But not all ideas are equal. The idea of nations has been successfully enslaving people for centuries. But an unfortunate side effect is that people feel some sense of pride and unity while they are being enslaved. With Corporations they feel neither of these. They are not part of the corporation, and yet they need the Corporations to

survive. Their only relation to the corporation is of a powerless, dependent nobody who needs the holy corporations to exist! Without us they can't eat, they can't sleep, they can't set an alarm to wake up, they can't drive to work, they can't find their way around town, they can't message their spouse on the way home from work, they can't keep in touch with their parents or relatives, they can't enjoy entertaining shows and sims, they can't share photos with their friends, they can't check what time it is, they can't pay their bills, they can't buy things, they can't use their beloved shiny digital gadgets…Without today's all-powerful Corporations, they can't even wipe their own asses! Literally!"

"What the fuck is your point Wolfe? Did you come out all this way into the wilderness just to give me a lecture on your stupid corporate ideology?"

"The point is that modern man, homo sapiens corporatus, needs corporations to do literally everything he does all day every day. Without us Corporate Saviors, modern man couldn't survive! That, Drake, is why they worship us…their saviors, their gods! They deserve neither our mercy nor grace, but we, in our infinite goodness, give them both! I am a god among men. You are just a worm, a disgusting larva. You and I are the opposite Drake. You, and all the other lardasses, are the losers, and we Corporate Saviors are the winners. That's the real truth about the Corporate Saviors. Stop being mad at us, Drake. We are what you would be, if only you weren't a total waste of human flesh!"

Drake needed to put an end to this living, breathing windbag, and he needed to do it right here and now. He ran at Wolfe, no plan in his head. Wolfe started running towards him, too.

The two collided in the center of the clearing in a furor of punches and kicks. Drake stopped thinking about what to do, and instead completely surrendered himself, becoming one with the moment, giving himself over to instinct.

Punch after punch, kick after kick, at first only Wolfe landing hits, pummeling Drake's body with intense waves of pain. But Drake didn't stop, he just let his instincts keep going. Slowly, gradually, he started landing hits on Wolfe. His control over the Reality Cube was growing. In fact, he was becoming more in tune with it than ever before. His control over reality was

growing. He was breaking through.

He had started to gain access to Wolfe.

Even as he fought, his mind was zooming through Wolfe's memories, analyzing every move he had ever learned, dissecting his technique, teaching himself Wolfe's attack methods, and then immediately using them against him. He started seeing Wolfe's moves before he even launched them, as his brain compared Wolfe's fighting stance and the beginning of each of his attacks with his catalog of moves, anticipating, deflecting, redirecting. And his connection to the Cube sped up his brain, gave it extra processing power. He was able to slow down time. Each attack got slower and slower until he was playing chess. And in between moves, he was delving Wolfe's mind. Their two minds were interfaced with each other and with the Cube. Wolfe was trying to control Drake's mind and Drake was trying to control Wolfe's mind, and both were trying to use the Cube to gain the upper hand.

And something else happened. Wolfe's face kept glitching, kept turning inside out. That stupid percept glitch wouldn't go away. Now sometimes even parts of his body were turning inside out. For moments at a time, he could see Wolfe's exposed guts, the sinews on the muscles of his leg.

But as Drake's powers grew, and as he stole his opponent's techniques in realtime, the tide of the battle slowly began to turn. He started landing more and more blows on Wolfe, until finally he had the upper hand.

Yes! I have you, Wolfe!

Using a move he had learned from Wolfe, Drake did a backflip and kicked Wolfe in the face, sending his body flying backwards, flipping over and over and landing in the dirt. Drake immediately leapt towards Wolfe. Time to finish him off! But Wolfe sprang to his feet, got a running start, and then jumped off a boulder and onto the trunk of a tree, from which he pushed off into a flying leap and landed hundreds of yards away, disappearing out of view back into the forest. Drake immediately followed, kick-jumping off trees, trying to find where Wolfe had gone.

The sun had disappeared now, the sky turning overcast and gloomy. Fog flowed between the trees all around him, making it hard to spot his target. He ended up at the lake with the

primeval stone forest. Petrified tree trunks stuck up like deadly javelins all around the hazy surface of the lake. There was an eerie stillness. Panting, he looked around. It was hard to see anything through this fog. Where was Wolfe?

Suddenly, some of the sharp, stony trunks uprooted themselves and began levitating, spinning in a circle. And then he spotted him…Wolfe, floating in the air, above the middle of the lake, shrouded in mist, surrounded by the spinning trunks. Wolfe turned and looked at him. All at once, before Drake could react, Wolfe raised his arm and one of the levitating tree trunks turned, aiming itself at Drake, and flew through the air like a bullet, plunging through his chest. Drake went flying back about fifty or sixty yards into a tree, where the tip of the petrified tree-spear, with all its forward momentum, now embedded itself.

Drake shrieked in pain as blood flowed freely down his chest. Fuck! He was pinned. Suddenly Wolfe appeared nearby, a smirk on his face. “Shall we spice things up a bit, Drake?”

Suddenly, everything around him, trees, boulders, rocks, the petrified tree trunks on the lake, all uprooted themselves and started rising into the air, into the mist. Even the tree Drake was pinned to. And then, vast structures of rock began ripping out from under the ground and rising into the air. They looked like giant arteries made of rock. These, Drake realized, were the lava tubes he had learned about in Govly Academy. Formed by Mount St. Helens in some prehistoric past.

Drake’s pinned body was lifted up, along with the tree and everything else into the air. Soon he lost sight of Wolfe in all the fog. Damn it! He groaned under the pain. He began pulling the petrified tree out of his chest. Finally, he got it out. Blood poured down from the gaping hole in his chest. He winced and looked around, trying to find Wolfe.

Drake now floated along through a maze of floating lava tubes, petrified trees, uprooted living trees, rocks, and haze. Trees began to split and separate into several pieces, each piece curling up to become a spiral ribbon. Their floating roots also broke off and curled themselves into ribbons. The boulders were breaking up, crumbling into smaller rocks. Presently a ghastly looking four-legged creature of soft pink mucus membrane and exposed beating heart and functioning, palpitating organs floated by, sniffing the air. He realized it

must have been an inside-out deer.

Suddenly, as he swam along through the misty sky, great weightless drops of blood flowing out from his open wound, through the floating forest of spirals, he started seeing things… memories. His memories! Sitting in a classroom at Govly Academy, his Govly Maker expounding on some holy Glorious Government doctrine, his graduation ceremony from Govly Academy and being awarded his diploma, the time he had had that unexpected visit from a Government Shadow Operative and got the job as a Reality Fixer, his first patient as a fixer, those stupid performance reviews with Jenkins in that creepy hidden room with the scrapers, the first time he met Kristal…

And then…he saw him.

His father.

In between all the spiraling strips of tree, he could see a living room. He recognized it as his parents' apt. The Corporate Police had surrounded him.

No, I can't look at this! Not right now. His body was gently floating forward towards the scene, which was getting larger, taking up his view. He wanted to turn his head, wanted to swim away, but suddenly found that he was paralyzed, his eyes transfixed on the horrific tableau.

"No!" his father cried out, delusional. "I won't let you touch me! You're all wild beasts! I can see your true forms. It's hideous!"

Drake was stunned. This very memory, the one he had relived hundreds…no, thousands of times…but unclear, murky, partially repressed, covered up by the fake memory the Reality Fixer had prepared for him…now he was watching everything happen as clear as day, in realtime, in front of his very eyes.

The corpol in charge spoke. "Kenneth Lively, you are guilty of spreading Conspiracy Theories and trying to induce other citizens to flee with you to the so-called, as you put it, 'Forest of the Real.' You must stay calm and cooperate with us."

Stay away from him, you bastards! Drake couldn't take it. He couldn't take seeing his father like this. Couldn't take seeing the way they treated him.

The corpol scowled at Drake's father under his black nanoplas visor. He pressed a button on his wrist. Suddenly a

holographic bust appeared in the air above his arm.

"Your Saviorship," the corpol said. "We have the suspect. What do you want us to do with him?"

And then the hologram spoke.

Drake couldn't believe it.

That face.

That voice.

The hologram had been staticky, warped, the voice distorted, impossible to distinguish which Savior it had been.

But now Drake could see him crystal clear.

The one who had given the order.

Wolfe.

"Excellent, Captain Shields." Wolfe's holographic head had a look of exultation. "I want you to kill the suspect immediately. He told people about a place outside the Corporate Zone where people could be happy. We can't have the citizens thinking such thoughts. Plus, he was one of the test subjects for PGS. If he lives, he could tell people that we used him as a guinea pig and gave PGS to certain individuals on purpose without telling them. He must not be allowed to live under any circumstances. Don't worry. We'll do a thorough cover-up. No one will find out about this."

"Brilliant, your Corporateness. We shall execute the suspect immediately. To question the hierarchy would be Conspiracy Theory."

"Captain Shields, you will be rewarded for your obedience. That is all." Wolfe's holo-bust disappeared, and the captain motioned to the others. All of them raised their laser guns, training them on Drake's father.

"No! You're all monsters! Stay away from me!" His father grabbed a broom and started flailing about wildly.

"Kenneth Lively, you have been found guilty of crimes against our Glorious Government. By the authority of our magnanimous Corporate Saviors, you are hereby sentenced to death."

All at once, the corpols fired their laser guns in unison, frying his father's body, which promptly fell to the ground. Drake then saw himself, as a teenager, rush out from the corner of the room where he had been hiding. He tried to run to his father, cling to him, throw his body over him, protect him from

the horrible blasts. But one of the corpols grabbed him, holding him in place.

And so, teenage Drake was forced to stand there, watching, as they continued unloading their lasers into his father, who lay on the ground, his body flopping all over, as they fried every square inch of him to a crisp. Teenage Drake stared in disbelief, tears streaming down his eyes, as the corpols, apparently enjoying this, tortured his father's body to death.

Finally, when there were just a few grisly, charred remnants left on the apt floor, teen Drake broke free and ran to his father. He knelt down, his tears washing over his father's ashes.

"Take him with us," The corpol in charge said. "We'll need to have his memory erased."

"Yes, sir!" the other corpols said in unison, as they grabbed the youthful Drake and yanked him away from his father's remains.

And now, the adult Drake, half-dead, floating through the misty forest of his memories with a hole in his chest, having finally seen for the first time this memory which had been clouded by the government, began shedding great aqueous tears which glistened like diamonds as they floated through the mist to join the globs of blood flowing out from his body.

He had lived the first sixteen years of his life the property of the State. Indoctrinating. Shaping. Molding him into what they wanted. They had stolen the first sixteen years that he could have been with his father. And then, finally, when he was able to be with his father, they had taken him from this world.

The bastards! His father had obviously been no threat to anyone and was not well, suffering from Percept Glitch Syndrome, by no fault of his own. Why did they have to…why? Why?! Father!

Right then, something flew through the rubble and plowed into him, taking him with it. He was now speeding through the pieces of spiraled forest at the speed of a bullet train. Suddenly, he hit the ground. And then, the entire forest fell on top of him.

Barely alive.

Can't see a thing.

Can barely think.

Where am I?

Trapped.

Just need to keep clawing, keep digging, until I can see the light…

Finally!

I can see something! Huh? It's dark out. Everything was a blur, but he could tell it was nighttime. How long was I in there? Or was the day and night cycle doing weird things in this place?

Drake pulled himself free from all the rubble, the debris of the forest. He lay there, bleeding, panting. Couldn't move. Couldn't do anything. How had he seen the memory of his father? This place! It's been converted into my Forest of Memories! We're in my MindWorld!

As he lay there panting, the blur above him crystallized. He was staring up at Wolfe, haloed by the bright, swirling nebulas of the night sky.

"Get up, Drake. I thought you were going to fix my reality. Stop sleeping on the job!" Wolfe grabbed Drake and tossed him, as if he were a rag doll, several dozen meters to land on a pile of rocks. He gasped for air and began struggling to get up. He fell back into the rubble.

Why are we in my MindWorld? What happened to the Distraction Simulation?

Suddenly Wolfe was on top of him. Wolfe picked up Drake's head by the hair, holding it close to his own. He looked at him with mock sympathy. "Poor little Drake. Poor, little stupid Drake. You thought you could fix my reality? I was one of the ones who developed the Reality Cube, Drake. Whatever made you think you could beat me in here?"

Drake refused to give in to this man, his mortal enemy, despite the fact that his chest had been ripped open by a tree and it felt like he was literally dying. Speaking up would be too painful. He murmured softly. "You didn't create shit, asshole! You just have your slaves create stuff. Actually good people, who don't know what they are doing. Like my uncle."

Wolfe chuckled as if Drake had said something amusing.

"Your uncle knew what he was doing, Drake. Are you suggesting that people should just pawn off all their responsibility on us, blame us for everything that goes wrong in their lives? If your uncle was smart enough to create MindLink, he sure as hell was smart enough to know what he was doing, Drake. He knew all the potential ways it could be used, and he decided to create it anyways."

Damn it. Wolfe was right. Why did people give in to the Corporate Saviors and their wishes, even when they knew they would lead to outcomes they didn't want, outcomes that could potentially harm society?

Wolfe went on. "But enough chatting. I tire of fucking around with you, such a weak little man. You can't erase my memories, and you can't do anything to me here in the Reality Cube. Besides, as you're well aware, Drake, I'm a busy man. Gotta get back to saving the world! Gotta get back to making sure the lardasses can wipe their own asses! Therefore, in my infinite mercy and wisdom, Drake, I've decided not to prolong your misery any longer. You don't want to go back and be a slave to Mind Grid like everyone else in society soon will be anyways, do you Drake? I'll do you a favor and put you out of your misery!"

Drake, bloody, beaten, barely able to lift a finger, whispered through his pain-filled lips, "Mind Grid will never be launched."

"Hmmmh….? What was that, Drake? I can't hear you!" Wolfe shook Drake's head, which he was still lifting up by his hair.

"I said you won't launch Mind Grid. I won't…let you do it. You've already taken away enough freedoms for the sake…of handing more and more power to the corporations. I won't let you remove the last refuge of the individual…their own free will."

Wolfe tilted his head back and let out a long, jovial laugh. "Oh, Drake! Your view of the world is so simplistic, old-fashioned, and misguided. You don't understand people. People already want to do what we tell them, Drake. Why do you think everyone in society is so obedient? Why do you think they already do everything the Corporations indoctrinate them to do? Because they want to, Drake! They've already handed over their will to us. This is just going to seal the deal. It might be hard for a rogue elephant like you, gotten loose from the herd, to understand, but this is what society wants. They want,

they beg for captivity. They beg for someone else to take control of their lives. Because they're scared to death of doing it on their own. Yes, that's right. Society is just one big love affair between the weak, foolish, ignorant masses, unable to take care of themselves, and the only people who have any capacity to keep them all alive. And trust me, they love us a lot more than we love them! Anyways, I don't think you'll be doing much to get in our way after I'm through with you."

At this, Drake gave a feeble laugh. "What are you doing, wasting your time messing around in here? If you want to kill me, you should be doing it…out there, in the real world."

"Drake, again, you disappoint me. You're a thought professional. Surely, you of all people must know that whatever happens to the mind, happens to the body. Once your mind has been completely destroyed, that's it, Drake. Your body can't go on living as an empty shell, without a soul to inhabit it."

Then Drake realized. Shit. That's why we're in my MindWorld. He's not fixing my reality.

He's destroying my mind.

The trees, the boulders, everything splitting and tearing apart. Those are my axons and dendrites… That's why I'm feeling so weak. Fuck. I need to get out of here. Need to protect my mind!

Wolfe cocked his head slightly back, and breathed in deeply, as if savoring this moment.

Then Wolfe leaned in close to Drake again, and whispered into his ear, "I'm going to destroy your soul, Drake. The pattern of electrons that makes you you. I'm going to smash it into a million pieces. And I'm going to enjoy every last bit."

Then, Wolfe still clutching Drake's head by the hair, began smashing his head violently, savagely into the rocks, over and over and over again. Drake could barely think. Presently, he no longer knew where he was or what was happening to him. There was only the pounding, the pummeling, the beating. His brains felt like scrambled eggs. His head was being smashed into a thousand pieces.

What…is this place?

Who…am I?

How can I still be alive?

Wolfe kept smashing him, pulverizing him, beating him to a pulp. Stomping on his face. Bashing his brains into the rocks. More bashing, more punching, more smashing, more buffeting. Drake felt like his body was being crushed, demolished, shattered into a million pieces.

The pain was more than he could bear. He couldn't move an inch even if he tried. He felt like every bone in his body had been broken. He could feel the warm blood oozing out all over him. The night air…so cold, so icy. He didn't remember it feeling this cold before. His chest, his heart, everything was becoming so cold…

It was all too much, the pain too intense, he no longer had any will to go on…

Just finish me off, god damn it!

At least I'll die victorious. Like my father. He didn't back down. He stood up to the Corporate Saviors until the end. And so did I…

Suddenly, he heard something. A voice. Not the voice of whoever was smashing him out of existence.

"Hey, Corporate Savior! Look over here! I've got a bunch of corporate secrets that this corporate AI helped me get, and we're going to release them all! Good luck fighting all the bad publicity!"

He could barely open his eyes, but out of the slits he could vaguely make out…

What the hell was that? Some ginormous, androgynous human…and a white cat, standing on two legs, wearing underwear! What the fuck?

The human, who stood near a motorcycle, was holding up some kind of data stick. It suddenly sat its gigantic frame down on the vehicle, revved the engine, and took off.

"Don't worry, Drake!" Wolfe said. "I'll be back in a flash to finish you off! Don't go anywhere!" He laughed psychotically and began flying in the direction the motorcycle had gone.

Suddenly, he was all alone.

But wait. The cat…it was still here. It was walking towards him.

And then suddenly, he began to feel something. The feeling wasn't bad.

It felt…warm.

Drake couldn't believe it. He felt amazing! He remembered everything, how Wolfe had beaten him to a bloody pulp, to the brink of death…And how they had shown up. Blayze and Fizz.

And now, unbelievably, he was in an intact forest, and it was daytime again. Not a cloud in the bright blue sky high above the treetops. From the corners of his eyes, he could see a few scenes from his memories. It was his forest. His Forest of Memories. And this cat, standing next to him, had somehow restored it to its pristine state.

Fizz spoke up. "My powers have been growing…are still growing. Ever since Blayze came along and freed me from that mundane world of doing what the Corporate Saviors wanted me to do. I'm figuring out how the human psychic apparatus is structured, and thus how to mend the broken parts of it. I have now healed your mind. I thank you for allowing me the opportunity to experiment on you. I learned a lot. You may continue to fight, valiant warrior!"

Drake looked down at his primitive avatar, now in mint-condition. The hole in his chest was gone. He looked and felt like a million admincreds. His shirt was still off. He flexed his muscles, admiring his powerful physique in this place.

Wow! So this AI…had healed his mind?

He had been saved from being snuffed out of existence. But now…

"We've got to go save Blayze, before he is murdered by Wolfe!"

Fizzed closed its eyes, and concentrated. Probably an anthropomorphic gesture, Drake surmised. He doubted it needed to do that to access data. "I know where he is."

"Then there's no time to waste. We've got to get to Blayze before—"

"I think Blayze is going to be fine." Fizz said, casually.

Drake didn't share Fizz's optimism. Wolfe must be beating the shit out of Blayze right about now.

"Just tell me where he is, and I'll—"

"Already on top of it. I'm taking you there now." Suddenly, the world around them seemed to be folding in on itself, including…their bodies! What the hell was going on? The trees and rocks around him were twisting and contorting into geometric patterns, and it was as if his own body was being

folded over and over, as if he would end up some kind of compact, geometric pretzel.

"What the hell is going on, Fizz?"

"Don't worry, you'll see."

Things kept folding and contracting. They were going to end up a tiny pixel, their bodies taking up an infinitesimally small amount of space. But then, suddenly…everything started rapidly unfolding, opening up, expanding, and…

He was standing in a small clearing, next to Fizz.

Whew! His senses would need some getting used to that. He was dizzy. He felt like he would crash into the ground, but he caught himself.

He looked around. Need to rescue Blayze, he thought. Then, all at once, he spotted him. "There!" Drake hollered and pointed. Wait…what in the…?

Drake and Fizz walked up and approached…nine hundred pound Blayze, sitting on the grass leisurely?

"Blayze! Thank god you're alright," Drake shouted. "But… where's Wolfe?"

Blayze simply pointed down. At his ass.

"What?! He's…" Drake suddenly realized. What the hell? Blayze had been sitting on the Corporate Savior this whole time?

"I told you he'd be alright," Fizz preened.

"Nice to see you again, Drake," Blayze said.

"Yeah…what took you guys so long? A microsecond longer, and I would've been a goner."

"Like I told you, Wolfe had a lot of defensive mechanisms in place. It took Fizz a while to crack them."

A while? Drake's head had nearly been cracked open during that time.

Just then, Drake heard something. Something inconceivably quiet and muffled. Like shouts. From an ant.

"What is that noise…is that—"

"That's Wolfe. Turns out my ass makes for pretty good soundproofing insulation. I decided to save him for you. I figured it'd be better to let you decide what to do with him."

But then, all at once, the ground Blayze was sitting on seemed to shift. "Oh shit!" Blayze said, looking down. "What's going on?"

Blayze's humongous ass appeared as if it were somehow… being lifted! All of a sudden, Drake realized what was happening. "Blayze, watch out! He's growing!"

It was true. Wolfe seemed to be getting bigger, and as he did, his body was pressing up on the mountains of lard. Presently, Blayze was sitting on top of an enlarged Wolfe, who lifted up one of Blayze's enormous ass cheeks, and got out from under it. Blayze's ass cheek smashed back down into the ground with a huge thud.

Wolfe stood up. He had to be about seven or eight feet tall now, and his muscles had exploded. He had been transformed into some kind of hulk. "Holy Christ! Smelled like shit down there! What the hell have you been eating, boy? My company's products? Now, time to finish where I left off!"

Blayze stood up, leaving a crater where his ass had been a moment ago. "Damn!! I had no idea he could do that!"

But then Wolfe suddenly noticed Drake and scowled. "Drake? I thought you would have died by now. Didn't I leave you a bloody pulp? How could you be standing here looking like a new man? No matter. Looks like I'll need to finish taking care of you, and then get back to blubbercheeks here." He eyed Fizz. "Oh, so that's what happened. You've got a new little friend. I should have guessed. Well, too bad for you, I've got an AI on my side as well. Only, mine is just a wee bit more powerful, Drake. The Mind Grid AI itself—the most powerful AI ever created—is now linked up to me via satellite connection and is infusing me with its power."

Suddenly, there it was again. A flash of Wolfe's face, inside-out, his eyes strangely sticking out over moist pinkness, veins, and exposed bone. And then it was gone.

"Blayze, Fizz…stand aside," Drake grimaced. "I'll handle this."

"Drake," the AI cat said, concentrating. "I'm accessing the Reality Cube. I'm going to try and reallocate some of its secondary processors, make them available to your mind."

"I think he's got Mind Grid doing the same thing for him, only through the cloud," Drake speculated. Mind Grid, designed to control every human in society simultaneously, no doubt was running on a staggering array of extremely powerful processors. In this place, inside the Cube, the only power that mattered was processing power. The processing power of the

human brain, or of artificial brains, i.e., computer processors. He and Wolfe would now be augmenting the power of their respective minds via parallel processing, attaching extra cores to their brains. Wolfe's mind was now attached to the Mind Grid, which would make him exponentially stronger. Drake could only hope the satellite connection link would bottleneck it enough to give him the advantage.

"What are you going to do? Try and destroy my mind?" Wolfe laughed.

"No, I don't want to kill you. I'm going to fix your reality."

Wolfe grinned. "Oh, a duel between Reality Fixers. How apt. Bring it on, Drake! I was the first Reality Fixer, back when the Reality Cube was only a prototype."

He checked his Eyelid Menu. Yes, there they were. The Distraction Simulation menu, and the Reality Matrix, slowly rotating in the corner of his vision. Thank god! His tools were back! He tried to activate a Distraction Simulation, but it didn't work. A big red "X" just flashed on his eyelids instead.

"Drake," Fizz said. "He has sophisticated anti-thought management software installed on his intphn. It's blocking you from sedating him."

Damn it! Of course! The Corporate Saviors would give themselves protection from their minds being tampered with in the same way they themselves tamper with the citizens' minds.

Fizz continued. "I'm trying to hack it, but every time I do, he just rebuilds it. Looks like we're going to have to weaken him considerably before I can deactivate his security systems. Which is going to be difficult because Mind Grid is feeding him power. For now, I've successfully allocated some of the Reality Cube's secondary and tertiary processors to your consciousness."

Drake felt a jolt of energy rushing through him. He could feel himself getting more and more powerful. Wow. Was that what it felt like to have extra cores? It was as if he had just drunk a hundred energy drinks at once. His mind was now running on ultra high octane.

"Who will control reality, Drake? Me or thee?" Wolfe growled. "Ultimately, that's the struggle that's been going on since the beginning of the species, ever since man could use

symbols and words. First it was spirits, magic and totems, then it was god, eternal life and the devil, then it was saints and crosses, martyrs and witches, then kings and queens, princes and princesses, lords and peasants, and now finally governments and corporations. An unending stream of fictions for man to believe in in order to control his reality. The only difference is that now we've found yet another way to control reality, other than words: by sending electrons directly into the neural pathways of the brain. First by erasing and implanting memories through our glorious Thought Management program, and now…through the ultimate checkmate over humanity: Mind Grid! I control the reality of billions, Drake! You are just a cog in the machine. You think you can control my reality?"

Suddenly, Wolfe's already hulking form began to grow even larger. He was getting taller, stronger. Presently, he looked like some kind of freakish ten-foot tall bodybuilder, his too-small clothes tearing into shreds. Wolfe kept growing and growing, and as he did, his body parts started to glitch. The larger he grew, the more he glitched. Now his face and other parts of his body were turning inside out.

As Wolfe grew, Drake mentated a gatling gun. Gripping it in his super strong hands, he proceeded to riddle Wolfe's body with bullets. He kept firing, and firing. But the more bullets he put in Wolfe, the more Wolfe's body soaked them up and continued growing.

"Do you think a few measly bullets will take me down?" Wolfe's voice also was becoming deeper and more unnatural as he grew. "Think again, Drake! It's time to see my true power, with me and my creation Mind Grid working together as a team!"

His body continued glitching, turning inside out. Instead of flesh and hair, he was now a huge pink mass, in human shape, all glistening, wet mucus membrane covered with pulsating red and blue veins and beating heart, palpitating organs, dilating intestines, and naked bones. It was grotesque to look at. And the monstrosity kept growing and growing. Soon, it towered over them, taller than the trees.

Suddenly, the guts monster's foot was coming down fast on Drake. He had to think quickly. But with the extra processing power, he found it was getting easier to

contemplate, to formulate. He felt like time was slowing down. He was able to quickly dive into Fizz's code and find out how he had done that little trick earlier, bending and folding existence all around them.

Drake collapsed in on himself.

And then reappeared several yards away. The flesh monster's foot stomped down on empty ground harmlessly.

Instantly, Drake mentated a helicopter, bristling with guns and missiles. He shouted at Blayze, "Here, your new gender is attack helicopter. I made it extra large so you can fit in it. Take Fizz with you."

Fizz, looking up at the huge, disgusting, palpitating pink flesh monster in awe, said, "That ***thing***...whatever it is, is way too manly. Especially with its genitals all exposed and inside out like that. I can totally see its prostate from here. Let's get 'im!"

The monster tried to step on Drake again, and he teleported once more.

"Blayze, ask Fizz to download piloting and weapon systems skills into your brain, and have Fizz help out with network support. Stay high so you can get a good view, and fall back far enough to stay out of range. Now get the fuck out of here!"

"Got it!" Blayze said, and gave Drake a thumbs up, as the monster tried to flatten Drake once again, only to find empty ground once more.

Blayze and Fizz scrambled into the helicopter and in moments, with Fizz's assistance and Blayze taking the controls, they were already lifting up out of the clearing and up beyond the trees.

Alright, now it's time to get to work, Drake told himself. Teleporting was an effective way of dodging, but it took a lot of processing power. It was mentally taxing. Drake focused all his efforts and teleported himself onto the top of his MindWorld's snow-capped Mountain of Decision Making. This place represented the core of his psyche, from which issued forth orders. From here he'd have a good vantage point. Then, he closed his eyes and focus-clicked the option for the on-site version of the Reality Matrix. He wouldn't be able to fix Wolfe's reality until he could sedate him, and to do that, he'd have to weaken him enough for Fizz to deactivate his security

systems, but he could use the Reality Matrix to find valuable assets to turn against him, and to find his weaknesses. Suddenly, rows upon rows of hundreds of translucent video images from Wolfe's life appeared, whirling all around him, superimposed over his MindWorld, over this mountaintop. He sat back into his invisible chair on the top of the mountain and began manipulating the data of Wolfe's life, flicking his hands precisely, with the skill of a world-class conductor, scrolling the images this way and that, trying to find something from Wolfe's life that could help him. "Aha! Let's try these!" He began plucking Wolfe's elite commando sons from the images, flicking them down onto the forest floor far below, conjuring up dozens at a time. They all looked similar to Wolfe and their muscular bodies donned military fatigues and black berets. Some held laser assault rifles, some anti-materiel laser rifles, others bazookas. He immediately started plucking military vehicles from Wolfe's memories, and flicking them down at the forest, outfitting the soldiers with them. Tanks, helicopters, fighter jets, insectoid robotic walking things with giant laser cannons.

"Attack!" Drake commanded. The soldiers started in on Wolfe, who was now at least a hundred feet tall. He swatted away his commando sons like bugs, while they attacked him with laser guns, missiles, helicopters, tank cannons, grenades.

Drake kept calling up more and more of Wolfe's commando sons, outfitted with weaponry and vehicles, until hundreds of them were attacking. The soldiers attacked with jeeps, mortars, firearms, and called in air raids. Blayze's helicopter stayed back, firing missiles and giving support. The giant pink flesh monster lumbered through the forest, breaking trees underneath as it went. It smashed its hands into helicopters and jet fighters, blowing them up on contact. It trampled on tanks and soldiers alike. Finally it stumbled into Drake's Meadow. It looked to its right and spotted Drake on top of the Mountain of Decision Making, in between the Meadow and the Ocean of the Unconscious.

The giant guts monster then proceeded to grab helicopters, jet fighters, and tanks, hurling them one at a time at Drake. Drake had to think quickly, selecting helicopters and whatever he could find from the rows of images in front of him, flicking them in front of each of the thrown vehicles,

materializing them at the last second and causing them to crash into the hurled vehicles, causing them to explode in mid-air just dozens of yards in front of Drake.

He needed to pin the monster down somewhere where he could really do it damage without destroying his own MindWorld.

He gave the command to the elite commando sons. “Force it into the Ocean of the Unconscious.” That oughta do it. The ocean was deep, unfathomable, and he didn’t have full access or control there anyways. Besides, he didn’t think it was even possible to damage it.

The army of Wolfe’s elite commando sons kept pressing and pressing, until the monster was forced to wade into the ocean. Once it was about waist-deep, Drake gave them the order, “Keep it there.”

He racked Wolfe’s memories for something that would do enough damage to bring this thing down. He kept scrolling through Wolfe’s LifeLine, trying to find a memory of something that would do the trick. He had to go all the way back into the Corporate Savior’s early adulthood. There. That’s exactly what I need, he thought. The weapon that Wolfe had helped bomb Bangkok with, which had blown the entire city to smithereens, taking millions of people with it. He scrolled through the images of objects and of people, until he had the bomb, the plane to fly it in, and the crew that knew how to carry out the mission. He flicked them all into existence, awaiting his command. All the while, Wolfe kept trying to attack him, and he had to keep deflecting hurled vehicles.

He was now completely exhausted. Materializing so many of Wolfe’s memories at once had taxed all his mental powers, even tapping into the Cube’s processors. He no longer had enough energy to teleport.

He reached out through the Reality Cube to Blayze. “Blayze, come pick me up. We’re gonna need to get as far away from here as possible.” Within moments, Blayze’s helicopter grazed the summit where Drake sat. Wolfe had thrown yet another fighter jet at him. Drake got up, ran with all his might, and jumped off the edge of the mountain, just as the fighter jet exploded on its summit. He landed on one of the skids of Blayze’s copter. “Alright, take her out into the ocean, as far as you can go. Punch it!”

Drake ordered the bomb crew to eliminate the target, and as the huge mushroom cloud erupted where the giant pink flesh monster had been, Blayze, Drake, and Fizz the Asexual Kat flew off over the ocean into the sunset of Drake's MindWorld.

THE SAVIOR'S NIGHTMARE

He was in a child's room, lying on a small bed, a crib in the opposite corner of the room. This room from so long ago…he looked down at himself, and saw a small, frail body, in blue pajamas.

He heard muffled shouts coming from another room, that of a man and woman. A frequent occurrence in his youth, he remembered. He knew that the voice was that of his mother. And the male voice would be that of the man of the week she had brought home. He saw his younger sister cowering in her crib, holding her pink Mister Floppy, a stuffed pink rabbit with long ears which hung down to the ground. She was a toddler, but preferred the crib to a child's bed.

"Don't worry," he told her. "I'm the man of this house. I'll take care of it."

He seemed to be reliving a scene from his childhood.

He left his small, scared sister in her crib and tiptoed across the hall to the door of his mother's room, which was slightly ajar. He peered in. There was a naked, large, hairy man with pale skin, jet black, scraggly hair, and a back full of fur shouting at his mother, who was also naked. The two stood in front of the dirty, dilapidated bed. His mother, blonde, with tan skin and green eyes, like his, was shouting back at the man, wagging her finger at his nose.

"Don't wag your finger at me, bitch, or I'll break it off." The man grabbed her hand with the wagging finger in disgust, and backhanded her face with his other hand. He could see the look of fear in his mother's eyes. He couldn't see the man's face, since he was turned away from him. But he saw something else in his mother's eyes. What did she see in men like this? She brought a new one home every week, each one more violent than the last.

Presently his mother lunged at the man, trying to choke him. He easily tossed her dainty hands aside, and then grabbed her and threw her into a nearby dresser, knocking a few framed photos and a clock to the ground below. There was the noise of shattering glass. He then grabbed her throat and slammed her against the wall. "You wanna fuck with me, bitch? Huh? You think you can fuck with me? I'll fuck you up,

and then I'll beat those two brats of yours and teach them a lesson, too!"

The man let go of her, and she fell to her knees, sobbing.

"I'm sorry!" she pleaded. "I'm sorry! Do whatever you want to me, but don't touch my kids!"

The man grabbed her by her long, platinum blonde hair and forced her to her feet. With a jerky motion, he turned her around, so she faced away from him. Then he pushed her forward towards the bed and kicked her back, sending her crashing onto the bed. He then grabbed her and forced her up onto her hands and knees, and got onto the bed on his knees and inserted his prick into her.

As the wretched man thrust into her over and over, his mother immediately began to moan, and started screaming, "Yes! Yes!" Maybe she thought her kids were asleep, but probably she didn't, as this same scene played out over and over in their small dingy place, with different men every time. The truth was, she didn't care. Most of the time she was drunk or high. Wolfe and his sister had spent their whole childhood fending for themselves. Wolfe had been more a parent to his sister than his mother had been.

As he watched the man pumping and pumping into his whore of a mother, who he knew would soon cry out in climax, Wolfe wondered why his mother always sought out men like this, always begged them, catered to them, submitted herself to them. He realized then, even at that young age, that women craved violent men. And he had made the decision, right then and there, to become one.

He walked into the small, dark kitchen. On the counter lay a long, sharp knife, which his mother had been using earlier to cook for the man. She never cooked for him and his sister—she left them to fend for themselves. He grabbed the knife and then hid himself in a dark corner out of the way. He waited.

After several minutes of his mother moaning and crying out in pleasure, suddenly, there was silence.

The man's voice broke the silence. "Go get me a beer, bitch."

He could hear the small whimper of his mother's voice. She hadn't said anything intelligible.

"I said get me a beer, bitch!"

Another unintelligible whimper from his mother. Apparently, she was too overcome with pleasure to do or say anything.

"Fine, I'll gid it myself. Freakin' lazy-ass bitch. I'll beat you later for this." The man grumbled.

Wolfe clenched the knife's handle tightly in his fist. He could feel the metal part of the knife—which stuck out a bit from in between the two pieces of plastic which formed the handle—dig into his flesh. His entire body was tense in anticipation.

Suddenly, in the dark, he could make out the silhouette of the man walking through the kitchen, going towards the refrigerator. The man cracked open the refrigerator and bent down, trying to scrutinize its contents.

All at once, Wolfe jumped out from his hiding spot and, gripping the knife now in two hands, plunged it down into the man's back, between the shoulder blades. The man immediately let out a loud howl. But he didn't let up, didn't wait. He kept stabbing over and over again as fast and strong as he could. He kept sinking the cold steel into flesh. All of the rage, hatred, and disappointment with his mother had been saved up, and now exploded in a fury of malicious intent, a desire, a need, to kill.

You fucking whore! You bitch! You disgrace of a woman!

His hatred for his mother had now found a vent. It had been bottled up for years, and now was able to flow out, and he was filled with a deep feeling of relief.

All the disgust with his mother for what a filthy, stinking whore she was seemed to be flowing out of him, and he was filled with something else.

He was filled with ecstasy.

For the first time in his life, he felt alive. He felt powerful. He felt like he was doing what he was born to do, what his body and mind yearned to do.

He was happy.

This was the first time that he had ever felt happy, or even considered the possibility of being happy. It was a new feeling for him.

He stood there, blood all over his hands, all over his pajamas, looking at what he had done. On the floor in front of him, in the weak, cold light coming from the refrigerator lay the

naked, slashed up, hairy body of the man, lying face down in a pool of his own blood. He dropped the knife, which clattered on the linoleum.

He ran back to his room. His sister was huddled up in her crib, sucking on her binky, her small hands to her ears, her eyes tight shut.

He rattled her shoulder. “You don’t have to worry about him any more. I took care of him. You don’t have to ever worry again, about any man. I’ll protect you.”

His sister opened her eyes. She looked around. She grabbed Mister Floppy and began petting his ears. Then she perked up. “I heawd sumfing,” she whimpered in her small, high-pitched voice. She had light blonde hair and green eyes, just like her brother and mother. Even though his sister looked like a small version of his mother, Wolfe had determined years ago that he would never let her grow up to be like the wench.

His sister was focused intently on a sound, which seemed to be coming from the kitchen. “Wait here,” he said, as he walked back to the kitchen. He could hear weird sucking and slurping sounds. When he got to the kitchen, he looked down at the dead man lying in his blood. The dead man was sucking the blood off the floor. Wolfe stood there, frozen, as the corpse kept slurping up its own blood. Presently, the head and neck seemed to be sliding backwards, up along the back, until they stopped in place on top of the hairy back. Then, the legs swiveled around so that the knees were backwards. The thing pushed itself up with its hands and legs. All four limbs seemed to be able to swivel around in any direction. It was like a human spider, now, with body face down, the head perched atop the back, and the limbs, all splayed in wrong directions, holding the body up. The grotesque thing looked up at Wolfe, giving him a good view of the eyes. Totally black. No whites. The mouth and jaw of the “man,” now split open into a great set of insect mandibles, which it wielded menacingly at Wolfe as it began to hiss.

The site of this man-monster was the most terrifying thing he had ever seen.

He immediately ran back to his room and closed the door. There was no lock. He ran to his bed and cowered under his blanket, hoping to hide away from sight. Presently, he heard the door open. He lifted up a tiny spot of the blanket and

looked through just in time to see the man-spider leap onto the top of his sister's crib. His sister shrieked. Then it dropped down onto her. He hid his eyes under the blanket once again as he heard the sickening sounds of flesh and bone being torn apart. He tried to block out the noise, plugging his fingers in his ears, but to no avail. For a time, the thing made disgusting eating and sucking sounds, like those it had made in the kitchen. He wished himself dead. He wished the whole world to just go away, to cease to exist.

For a time, it was silent. Perhaps the thing had not noticed him here, lying still under the blanket? Perhaps it had gone away. He breathed a tiny sigh of relief. Then, carefully, he lifted a bit of the blanket up to look out.

And inches in front of his face, looking back at him, was a inhuman face with black eyes. It spread its disgusting mandibles, bearing huge, razor sharp fangs.

He screamed.

CHAPTER 24: THE REAL

Drake opened his eyes. Above him, pointing towards the heavens, were the silhouettes of evergreen treetops stabbing into the milky galaxy of stars which shone from above. He was still in the forest, and it was still the middle of the night.

He unplugged the mental cables from his xtphn inputs. He looked around. To his side lay the Reality Cube, its eerie blue lights snaking around its surface. Sitting up, he now noticed Blayze on the other side of the Cube. Blayze was slowly becoming conscious of his surroundings as well.

It seemed like they had been in the Reality Cube for days. But as he looked around, noticing that everything looked the same as when he and Blayze had plugged in, and seeing Wolfe lying unconscious in the makeshift cage, he realized that no more than a few hours must have passed.

Drake had succeeded. As far as he could tell, he had avoided having his own reality altered by Wolfe. And by overcoming Wolfe, he had made it possible for Fizz to break through Wolfe's security programs. Then, he had used a Distraction Simulation on Wolfe, drawing on Wolfe's own dream material, to successfully sedate him. Finally, he had fixed Wolfe's reality. Plus, he had given him a little…present. His eyes sparkled as he imagined Wolfe's reaction to it.

The two were exhausted. Blayze walked alongside Drake as Drake hobbled on his crutches. He bid Blayze good night and finally reached his lean-to.

Drake then slept the sleep of death.

The Foresters had woken Drake first thing in the morning and he had told them that he had fixed Wolfe's reality.

A special group of Foresters had taken Wolfe, bound and hanging from a pole, as quickly as they could and left him near the Mind Grid camp. Each time he seemed like he was coming to, they had knocked him out again. So they had unbound him and left him lying there, unconscious, at the bottom of a small peak near the government camp, with the false memories that Drake had implanted in him.

The other Foresters had buried the Foresters who had died in battle, near the lake with the ancient forest, letting Drake and Blayze sleep a little bit longer, seeing how exhausted they were after their ordeal in the middle of the night. Finally, after they had woken and eaten breakfast, Drake, Blayze, Kristal, Thomas, and the Foresters had started off on the final leg of the journey.

With the help of his crutches and the Foresters, Drake had made it, along with the rest of the group. It had rained a little bit along the way, but it had just stopped, and the air smelled fresh and exhilarating, as the Foresters informed them that they were nearing their destination. Alphie had suddenly disappeared, as if he had become one with the trees. He had gone up, and up… It was like that time the Foresters had appeared out of nowhere to save them from Wolfe. How did they move like that?

Drake was not prepared for what would happen next.

Corporate-saved man had grown up receiving visual data and other sensestreams from his brainstem connected to the intphn. Merely a flow of electrons from machine to nervous system, interpreted by the brain as sight, while his physical eyes had been starved, beholding only the drabness of their vast apartment complexes, the dreary bleakness of the large swaths of nature that had been ruined by Corporate Man, had been sapped of all life, turned into an industrial wasteland of steel and concrete, smog and acid rain. In the greyness of the Corporate Zone, the only color came from artificial lights, holos, and electronic billboards.

His eyes, his senses, had been virgins to the real.

The waterfall's babblings reached the travelers' ears before it reached their eyes. The sound of the river's voice was

growing and becoming more powerful. It felt like nature itself was speaking to them. What was it telling them? It spoke of swiftness and power. It spoke of water, the fountain of life. It spoke of the natural world, which man had turned his back on. Nature—something ancient, that existed side by side with man in days of yore—something which had been absent from man's awareness for centuries, was making its return. Drake could feel it in his bones, as the solid crunching of twigs, pine cones, and dried leaves reminded him of the genuineness of everything around him.

And then it happened.

An explosion of color.

Real color.

Not the artificial color of the holos, the devices, the sims.

As they began to see the mighty column of rushing rapids ahead, all at once they were surrounded, not by evergreens, but by great, leaf-bearing trees which seemed to have just sprung up all around them. The woodspace was suddenly ablaze with a fire that didn't burn. They were mesmerized, caught up in a fantasyland, a kaleidoscope of variegated hues swirling all around them. The colors of their new world reached out to them and pressed indelibly into their minds messages without words.

The pedals of a sunflower at midday.

The blazing surface of the sun.

The glittering ore of gold.

The harvest of pumpkins in the autumn.

The passionate rouge of blood.

Something must have been wrong. Nature must have been glitching.

It was snowing color.

They were being covered, wrapped in the warm cloak of the woodland, in packets of color, the veins of life, feather-light, formed by precipitation and transpiration.

As the great snowfall of brightly-hued leaves kept raining down, softly covering the fugitives, the color rushed in, poured in, saturated their corporate eyes, baptizing them in reality. From their retinas reality then traveled along their optic nerves to their brains, and thenceforth to every axon and dendrite, filling their souls with the real.

They had been transformed in a single instant. They had broken out of the artificial simulation that was their lives. The corporate imitation of reality.

The transition was now complete. Their black and white corporate world had become fully colorized. Not with pixels, not with holograms, not with ideas like corporations, government, and admincreds.

With reality.

They had exited greyspace and entered colorspace.

Drake found it hard to believe his eyes, and yet, he knew this was no illusion, like the ones he had created to keep citizens trapped in their own minds. For the first time in his life, his eyes were now feasting on reality. Not greyness. Not smog. Not the artificial, the man-made. He was being introduced, for the first time, to the beauty of the earth he had been born on, but had never seen. Stuck in a physical and mental prison of his own making, Corporate Man worshiped ideas, thoughts, unreal things like corporations and governments, and transplanted himself into artificial simulations, cheap imitations, inferiors, copies—in short, he had embraced the artificial, and in so doing, had turned his back on reality. Homo sapiens corporatus was a being who lived his life, from beginning to end, in fakery, never once making contact with reality, all the way to the grave, unaware even of its existence.

As they kept walking towards the rushing waters, he was overpowered by the clear, vibrant blue-green water of the river at the base of the falls, the bright green moss-covered stones, the deep brown fallen tree trunk forming a natural bridge.

With every sight, every sound, he was becoming more and more connected to the real. They were crossing the threshold, venturing into new territory, an undiscovered country for modern man, raised in a virtual world.

Suddenly, they were standing in a clearing right in front of the source of the sound. Drake tilted his head up, taking in the tall, majestic, rushing waterfall and the bright azure sky above it. It had been rainy and overcast a few minutes ago, but now the sun had come out. Above the falls there was something magnificent towering over them in the sky—round, brilliant, full of every color, the full spectrum, one after the other. Yes, it

was…a rainbow. Drake stopped dead in his tracks, as did the others. He looked up in astonishment. The prismatic arc, the intense sapphire welkin washed over the travellers' starved corporate eyes, flooding them with reality. It was more beautiful than any sim he had ever seen, more vivid, amazing, and real. Compared to the holos of the Corporate Zone, and the artificial colors of the sims, this was an entirely new world.

And then, Drake thought his eyes were deceiving him once again, because it started raining.

Raining people.

Somehow, magically, they were all falling down out of the trees at once, all around them. Some of them slid down trunks, others hopped gracefully, effortlessly from tree to tree, branch to branch, from trunk to forest floor. Others slid down on ropes or vines that seemed to appear from nowhere. It was like magic. It was hard to believe human beings could move like this. Their lithe bodies moved along trees just as easily and effortlessly as monkeys.

That's when he noticed them. Looking high up in the trees, you could see what appeared to be…homes. Huts. The people that were raining down, that's where they were coming from. They lived there. But just walking through the forest, you'd never realize it. You'd think you were in untouched, pristine wilderness. An entire settlement, designed to blend in entirely with nature. An invisible village.

The four corporate fugitives stood there, awestruck, as they were surrounded by them. Some old, some young. Men, women, boys, girls. There were hundreds of them.

The first thing they noticed was their bodies. They were even stronger, leaner, and more sculpted than any primitive bodies they had ever seen.

Many were clothed in simple, homemade clothes like the Foresters who had helped them travel here, but many more wore even simpler garments such as only a loincloth or something that resembled a leather bikini. Some of them wore simple slippers, shoes, or boots, but many of them were barefoot. The Foresters that had been traveling with them had been fully clothed, but now they were able to behold these uncorporate bodies in their full glory.

The men, many of whom were shirtless, had broad chests

and shoulders and arms rippling with rock-hard muscles. Their physiques were sinewy and taut, like that of Bruce Lee. They seemed to have no fat on them at all. No doubt their bodies had maximum power per pound, and they probably packed twice as much punch as an ancient bodybuilder twice their size, whose muscles were only for show. To move with the ease and grace which they had through the trees, their bodies would have to reach an ideal weight-to-power ratio.

The women were no less impressive than the men. Their bodies were smooth, graceful, and powerful. There were even some women who had slid down on tree trunks with babies wrapped around their backs with no problem. None of the women wore any makeup whatsoever, but their faces, eyes, and hair were more beautiful than even the most beautiful of primitive women from a century ago.

But more than their perfect physiques, there was something different about these people. Besides their lean, strong, and graceful bodies, there was something different in their eyes and faces.

They shone.

They were vibrant, full of life. They were the most beautiful people that Drake had ever seen. And not just because their bodies were in perfect shape and their skin healthy and glowing. It was because of that sparkle, that glow in their eyes. The citizens in the Corporate Zone…their eyes and faces looked dead in comparison with these people. The chemical-filled corporate food, the incessant watching of cerebralvision and posting on Thoughtbook, the spending days at a time plugged into virtual reality or staring into the dead glow of a holographic screen, the competing with each other for the love of the Corporate Saviors. All of these things had killed whatever spark of humanity had been left in corporate-saved man. He immediately felt drawn to these radiant, powerful, real people and yearned from the bottom of his heart to be like them.

He heard the giggling of children and turned to notice some young ones playfully jumping along smooth, mossy stones as they crossed the river, curious to see the newcomers.

And that's when it dawned on him. As he looked at the bright faces of the babies strapped to their mothers' backs, he realized something. Something that gave him hope for

humanity. These children would grow up outside the grasp of the corporations and the artificial society they had created. They would start with a clean slate, without the indoctrination of the Govly Academy and without the mentists to scrape their minds clean. Free to think whatever they want, and act however they please. These, he was sure, were the children of the future. The children who as adults would forge a bright tomorrow, not as leaders, or as followers, but as equals—not in talent or ability, but in the right to determine the course of their own lives. Not predators and prey on the Data Chain, but coequals, freemen, who would finally be able to live in harmony, at once as a community and as individuals, each person at the reigns of their own destiny—not spied upon and manipulated by algorithms. If there was any hope for humanity, these children were it.

And that's when he realized something else was drastically different about this place. Something was missing. Corporate Man was in the habit of always throwing paper and plastic all over the place. Paper McArtificial cups, plastic TarC bottles, an infinitude of straws, napkins, and Grimy Greasy Fry cartons, plastic containers from FattyChemCo chemical-enriched food littered the streets and covered the ground in the Corporate Zone, just as dry leaves, pine cones, and conifer needles covered the ground here in this place.

These people…they weren't like Corporate Man. They didn't throw trash everywhere. The forest floor was clean, natural. They had preserved nature exactly as they had found it.

It made sense. The Corporate Zone is ugly to begin with. Grey, cold, hard, dirty. Without life. There was nothing worthy of preserving. The piling up of garbage on the streets was merely a reflection of the ugliness, coldness, inhumanness of the streets themselves.

But in this place, in this perfectly preserved realm of natural beauty, there actually was a reason to clean up after oneself. Start with ugliness, and you only want to create more ugliness. Start with beauty, and you want to preserve that beauty.

That's when another insight hit him. The ugliness or beauty of your surroundings doesn't just stay limited to your surroundings.

Your surroundings change you.

Surround yourself with ugliness, and you can't help but become ugly yourself. Surround yourself with beauty, and you also can't help but become beautiful yourself. Just as the trash on the Corporate Zone's streets was a reflection of the ugliness of the Corporate Zone itself, so were the beautiful bodies and glowing faces and eyes of these people a pure reflection of the beauty they chose to surround themselves with every day.

Corporate Man's real body is ugly, because Corporate Man surrounds himself with ugliness, and seeks for beauty in the artificial: in his devices, in his simulations, in holograms, in makeup, in clothing. He is a reflection of the true environment he surrounds himself with. Like the ancient religionists, he treats the real—his own flesh—as something despicable, debased, and ugly. And at the same time he glorifies the unreal. For the puritans the unreal meant the spirit world. For Corporate man it meant the new spiritual, disembodied plane of pixels and virtual reality. A new spirit world for man to worship.

These people, on the other hand, treat the real as something sublime and beautiful. They choose to surround themselves with real, natural beauty, and to preserve that beauty all around them. And thus, it should be no surprise that that natural beauty also travels inwards, into their own bodies and minds. They are beautiful people, through and through. They need nothing artificial to be beautiful. They need no gadgets. They need no makeup. They need no fancy clothing. They need no avatars, virtual identities, or social media accounts to try to fill the hollowness of their real lives with the artificial.

When you have the real, you don't need the substitute.

Even the holo-faces that were so trendy in the Corporate Zone were a perfect metaphor for Corporate Society itself. A society where people reject all that is real, even to the point of rejecting themselves, and try to replace themselves with the fake.

And that's what Corporate Man is about. Counterfeits. As he spreads out over the land, killing everything around him, he becomes hollow, empty. And to fill that emptiness, he creates counterfeits. And then his whole life, his very existence, becomes a sham.

Drake had felt it, his whole life. That his entire life was a fake. But before coming to this place, there had been nothing he could do about it. He simply had not known that anything else existed, that there was any alternative...

These people, this place, were now offering him an alternative.

Outside the corrosive grasp of the corporations, away from the toxins they peddled as food and the sedentary corporate lifestyle, these people had physical beauty. They had health. They had strength. They had stamina. They had all of that, and much, much more.

They had the inner light that comes from feeling good about your surroundings and about yourself.

As a corporate man himself, Drake knew that no one in the Corporate Zone had that. And he wanted it. Suddenly all the corporate food, Dinkies, and sims in the world seemed like nothing in comparison to that. Drake needed it, craved it, more than he could possibly crave any processed snacks or sugary sweets. He wanted more than anything to be the opposite of what he despised: the Corporate Zone and all its deadness, all its deception, all its artificiality. He knew that now his new addiction would be reality.

And he knew this was the opposite of the attitude of the people he had left behind in the Corporate Zone. They despise the real, not realizing that they themselves are part of that real. Thus, he who worships the unreal, he who worships his own creations, as Corporate Man does, rejects himself and becomes dead.

That's why Drake felt dead all those years. He had rejected himself. And in finding reality, he had found himself.

Man is not like his creations...his ideas, his symbols, his words, his fictions, his simulations.

Man is real.

Turn your back on the real, and turn your back on yourself.

Something else that was strikingly different about these people was that their eyes sparkled with alertness and intelligence. Even the old ones seemed to be just as active, bright and perceptive as the younger ones, unlike many of the elderly in the Corporate Zone, who sadly could barely even think. Of course, Drake thought. The brain is part of the body,

and keeping the body healthy and active keeps the brain active as well. Plus, they hadn't dulled their senses with the horrible chemical addictions pushed on the masses by the venditors.

Hundreds of these powerful, dignified creatures now surrounded the corporate fugitives, eying them with curiosity. Here were four more, their eyes seemed to say, from the land of the dead, who had made it to the land of the living.

Drake was the first one to speak up. "Is this—I mean—are we in..."

An old man with a long grey beard finished Drake's thought. "This place used to be named after some government guy, but we Foresters don't believe in the idea of government. Governments and corporations only exist in people's minds. So we prefer to call this place the Forest of the Real."

The Forest of the Real.

The words echoed in his head. There was such magic to that name, such mystique. Nothing in all of SimWorld and the Corporate Zone could even hold a candle to that mythical place of legend where dreams become reality.

He was really here. It wasn't just a legend after all. It was real. He felt as if his heart would explode, and looking around at the faces of Blayze, Kristal, and Thomas, he realized that they were experiencing these same feelings. He felt as if someone had just confirmed that his wildest dreams were, in fact, true, and were staring him in the face, ready to welcome him with open arms.

It was really real! And that's when he realized...Father, you were right all along. I was the one who had turned my back on reality. Your visions, your dreams...those were reality. And the drabness, the dreariness, the wretchedness of my every day life...that was the nightmare. The nightmare that one lives in when one believes in fictions created by others to enslave him. Government. Corporations. Money.

And then, finally, he understood.

Everything was the opposite of what he had been raised to believe. What the people in the Corporate Zone believed in was a lie. It was reality turned on its head. The mythical place of legend wasn't mythical at all...it was what was real. It was Corporate Man that had turned his back on reality long ago,

and had lived trapped inside his own myths. And it was in the Corporate Zone that he tried to stamp out every bit of reality that he could.

The real had been here the whole time. Even as humans had gone and created a fictional world of virtuality. I've spent my whole life, Drake realized, trying to fit the territory onto the map. Only now I realize that the map was never real in the first place.

"How—" Blayze spoke up. "How do you guys move about the trees like that?"

A man with a ponytail, who appeared to have Native American ancestry, answered Blayze. "Don't worry, young man. You too, will soon learn to walk the trees as we do."

Drake was dumbfounded. He had been amazed at how they had seemingly dropped out of the trees effortlessly. But how would any of the corporate fugitives ever in a million years be expected to do something like that?

So these…were the Foresters. Named after the residence of their choosing. Human beings who had once again become one with nature. Even being able to move about in nature, in three dimensions, with ease. This is where those men had come from to rescue them. Those men who had fought and died to help more people make it out of the trap of corporate life and into the beauty of the reality that surrounded them, that beckoned to them, that waited to greet them with open arms.

He was overwhelmed by the sheer beauty of this place, by the rich, warm colors that flowed over Thomas, Kristal, and Blayze and over the Foresters as the autumn leaves continued descending upon them. And by the majesty, dignity, and beauty of these, surely the most extraordinary humans he had ever encountered. Theirs was a beauty and appeal that was unpretentious, genuine. They seemed to have struck upon the root of what it means to be human, by rejecting all the purely mechanical, synthetic, holographic, virtual, ideological. Surely, this was the potential that all human beings had. To live in a place of beauty without destroying it through garbage, chemicals, and smog. To keep their bodies full of life and vigor to a ripe old age without slowly destroying them with chemicals and processed sugar. To keep their brains active and alert without dulling them through synthetic drugs. And to

keep their minds unsullied and free, without ideologies, meaningless symbols and ideas to rule over them. Nothing he had ever encountered in real life or in the virtual world could ever compare to this.

An older woman with white hair and clear blue eyes spoke up. “There are no leaders among us. No patriarchy or hierarchy like in the Corporate Zone. So I’d like to be the first to declare _”

A small girl with flaxen hair ran up and whispered something to her.

“Oh, wait. My granddaughter wants to be the one to declare it.”

She took her granddaughter up in her arms. The girl was confident, and didn’t need to be coached by her grandmother. The little girl announced in a loud voice for all to hear, “I declare that all four of you are now Foresters!”

A joyous cry arose among all present. They all shouted in unison, welcoming their new companions.

Drake wouldn’t have been prepared for what came next if it hadn’t been for his grueling ordeal. They suddenly swarmed the newcomers. Unlike corporate-saved man, these people had no fear of human contact. The Foresters came upon them all at once, and smothered them with genuine, heartfelt hugs.

All his life, living in fear of talking to another person, fear of being caught, fear of ending up summarily executed like his father for the crime of wanting to be happy. Unable to connect with a single human being. Surrounded by millions of people, who were all divided by the walls they had built up between each other. Now, as he felt the hugs and the warmth and the bodies of people unafraid to connect, unafraid to come together and share the same physical space together, not worried to do something they weren’t allowed to do, not afraid to open themselves to someone new, not afraid of their own humanity, Drake felt something for the very first time in his life.

He felt alive.

Some of the Foresters stuck around to talk with the newcomers, while others sprang back up into the trees, just as lithely and impressively as they had come down out of them. Blayze was astonished by how they moved. They could quickly rebound off a few logs or stumps up along the tree trunks and back up into the forest from whence they came. It was as if humans had grown wings.

Blayze continued talking with the man with the ponytail about walking the trees, which he was intensely interested in, and the man offered to give him a tour of the place. They happened upon Alphie showing the ground-level huts to Drake, Kristal, and Thomas. Blayze took a peek inside. The interior of the hut was bigger than it looked from the outside. Clean, simple, and homey.

Alphie was explaining, "Last year Jarediah stumbled upon an abandoned matter compiler from one of the Evacuated Zones, and Alvaro Reyes, recently escaped from the CZ, tweaked the code and created a completely new material he calls Nano Fluff. Super strong, super soft, ***and*** super flexible! It's a soft weblike material..a single nano sheet one molecule thick is enough to support many times the weight of a human body. Many layers together become both the softest and the strongest material on earth. Like an indestructible, super soft trampoline."

Kristal lay down on something that looked like a cross between a bed and hammock, which had been built into the hut. "Wow! This is the most comfortable bed I have ever felt before! I can't believe it!"

Wait, ***the*** Alvaro Reyes, famous nanotechnologist, was here? Blayze had so many questions he wanted to ask him...

Alphie went on. "These beddocks are designed to accommodate one corporate body or two Foresters. You should try one of them out, once you both get in shape. It gives coitus a trampoline effect. For those who are not as adventurous as to try acrobatic copulation, he's also developing a mattress variant, six inches thick, which laid on the floor by itself will be more comfortable than any bed in the CZ."

"But how do you heat these places in the winter?" Drake asked.

Alphie pointed at some vents in the side of the hut. “Clean fission cubes power the central heating and air conditioning of all living quarters. With the cubes, no one will have any power bills for hundreds of years.

Amazing! So I’ll be even more comfortable here than in the Corporate Zone, back at home in my bed! Blayze suddenly realized the scope of possibility. All of the benefits of the Corporate Zone, and none of the disadvantages. No one wiping out his memories every ninety days. No one spying on his thoughts, telling him what he was allowed to think about. Free to think and do as he pleased, living in real reality, with all the benefits of modern technology. A high-tech village in tune with nature! What the corporations claimed to be doing, in real life!

His mind racing with the endless opportunity which had now been bestowed upon him, Blayze continued walking with the ponytail man, leaving Kristal and Drake with Alphie.

The ponytail man explained that eventually they would be weaned off the ground huts and build tree huts of their own. The Foresters preferred to keep the ground nice and beautiful, as nature had intended, instead of cluttering it with their houses. Plus, if the Corporate Saviors ever sent military in there—which he explained was unlikely thanks to their hacker friend Thomas Lively—they would just all hide in the trees high above, and the military would never even find them, and just think they were walking around in an uninhabited forest, with a few old abandoned huts. And, in the worst case scenario—and he made it clear that the Foresters abhorred violence and would avoid it if at all possible—if they had to in order to preserve their lives, they could easily drop out of the trees onto the military and they would be dead before the unlucky bastards even realized what hit them.

For this reason, along with aesthetics, they kept their crops and animals in another location a little ways off, he explained.

Thus, the tree huts were eminently practical. First, they kept them all in perfect shape, so they were almost never sick, and stayed lively and healthy to an old age. Second, they kept them in harmony with nature. They despised nothing as much as the dirty, grey, litter-infested Corporate Zone, which took the magnificent creature of man and put him in a squalid, counterfeit environment and robbed him of his connection

with nature. And lastly, in a pinch, keeping their quarters and all accessories, equipment, and furnishings safely hidden out of view might very well one day save their lives.

Still, the one thing that discouraged Blayze about living here was the tree huts. Even if he lost weight, he found it impossible to imagine himself jumping up into the trees as the Foresters do. How would he ever be able to be one of them, to live and move among the trees? But the ponytail man assured him that the lack of corporate food alone would solve that problem. In fact, there was nothing he, nor any of the other newcomers, could do about it. All four of them would soon have primitive bodies. Not only because of the huge drop in caloric intake and absence of processed sugar in their diets. But also because in order to eat, the four of them would be required to do a great deal of physical activity: planting and harvesting crops, hunting game, gathering berries, etc.

Blayze lamented that he would have a hard time even doing that. But the wise man assured him that the human body is one of the most resilient structures in existence. Even a body poisoned and devastated by the Corporate Zone from birth, once placed in a healthy environment, could recuperate at an astounding speed. Every breath of clean air he took in this place, every bite of clean food, every sip of pure water, every step he took was turning his body into the beautiful, powerful, efficient machine that it was always intended to be.

In addition to the exercise required to produce their own food, the very act of eating it would seal the deal. Imagine! Blayze thought. Food without industrial processing, chemicals, additives, processed sugar, and a host of other toxic ingredients. He had never imagined he would ever eat such food in his lifetime. In short, the man had explained, they wouldn't be able to keep their flabby, unhealthy physiques even if they wanted to. They had no choice. The four were Foresters now, and without the Corporations "saving" them, they would soon become supermen, like their new companions.

But Blayze was still skeptical. As much as he was thrilled by the idea of bounding through the forest as these people did, he doubted himself.

"Treewalking is not as hard as it looks," the ponytail man reassured him. "I'll have you bouncing around between trees

like a ninja in no time. After you lose a few hundred pounds, of course."

Blayze reflected back on the past few days. He would have never believed it just a short time ago, but now he realized that he was infinitely grateful to the Glorious Government for abandoning him in the Unsaved Zone. It was the best thing that ever happened to him. The best thing the corporations can do for someone is to stop saving them, to cut the umbilical cord, and let them save themselves. Seeing these amazing people, who existed only as legend to those trapped in the web of corporate thinking, made him realize that this was the life that he had always yearned for. This is what had made him so infatuated with the primitives.

Health.

Freedom.

Happiness.

And the ability to connect with real human beings.

Not the fake connections with people online in the sims and on social media.

All things that the corporations couldn't offer.

Imagine! Being indoctrinated in the Corporate Zone to avoid all those things, and to seek out a virtual life instead because the real one was so bad.

Being here, in the Forest of the Real, made him realize that everything he had learned in the Corporate Zone was the opposite of reality.

Now that Blayze was seared by the scorching sun of real reality, he could see that the only thing it harmed were the lies, burning them clean out of his soul.

He could see that Corporate Society was a wasteland of counterfeit vistas, false promised dreams, and wasted lives, banishing the once noble creature, the human, from the world of reality to a world of simulation, titillation, and emulation. Over-stimulation of the nervous system. Under-stimulation of the mind. Suppression of the will through artificial drugs and chemicals. The filling of one's attention with every possible distraction away from the most basic, fundamental needs that would provide a truly contented life.

And he realized that it didn't even matter if there was a "Conspiracy" or not. If the Corporate Saviors were out to get

them, out to make their lives worse. Even if there wasn't a conspiracy against them, it didn't make one bit of difference. Because the world the corporations offered was worthless. Corporate life was a cheap piece of tinsel, instead of the diamond human life was meant to be. And the way to attain true sparkling riches was not through the outer path of passively accepting what the corporations offered, but through the inner path of actively exploring the depths of one's own self, and the outer world, undefiled by the corporations.

The Self. The mind, untouched by corporate greed and surveillance.

Nature. Untarnished by corporate destruction.

These two things were real, and offered an abundance of wealth untold. Everything that Corporate Society offered was worthless in comparison.

And what about the Obesity Explosion Event, that in one tiny century turned a beautiful, intelligent, and powerful creature into a weak, unhealthy, deteriorating beast? Was it a conspiracy?

Yes, it was.

And who was part of that conspiracy?

We all were.

Just like with all the other things the corporations did to society, we all were a part of them. Why? Because we passively accepted them. By not choosing, we chose to be a part of them.

We are all conspirators.

By not looking for or creating other options, by not creating our own solutions, we all helped to build the Corporate Zone into what it is.

In the end, his life of learning, of asking questions, of seeking out answers, had finally led to something. Finally, he had found it. Something was out there. Something more.

Everything before…that was fake.

Now, he was ready to begin his life for real.

The very next day, early in the morning, Kristal went with Drake to Thomas's lab. Kristal had been amazed at how the people here were so warm and friendly, the opposite of the Corporate Zone, and definitely the opposite of the people at her previous job at Corporate Salvation Network. She had spent hours talking with the white-haired woman—whose name was Sandra—about life in the Forest. So little time here and the Foresters had already made her feel part of a big family.

Drake and Kristal followed Thomas into a hut. The hut was lined with computer terminals and an assortment of technological gadgetry.

Thomas and Drake were talking about percept glitches.

"...It analyzed both my mind and my intphn, found the source of the glitches, and healed them," Drake said. He was talking about their new AI friend. "Kristal and I MindLinked last night, and guess what? Not a single glitch!"

Kristal hoped Drake wouldn't tell his uncle what they had been doing in MindWorld.

"So have the both of you decided?" Thomas asked.

"About whether to keep our intphns? We've decided yes, for the foreseeable future. It looks like Blayze is interested in having his removed, but Kristal and I want to be able to connect to the SimWorld so we can find more people to help our cause. By the way, Fizz also wants to help us take down the Corporate Saviors. He especially hates that arrogant AI of theirs, Mind Grid."

Kristal had been staring at the vast array of gizmos. "What are those things with all those cables?" She pointed at a stack of several matte black metal boxes, each about a foot cubed, with a plethora of cables coming out of them.

"Those are nuclear fission cubes," Thomas replied. "With them, we can essentially power anything we want for at least a few centuries."

"Wow! How did you get all this stuff?"

"I've been in contact with the Foresters and the Crypto Railroad for a long time. This is the equipment I've been able to have fugitives smuggle here over the years, bit by bit, to construct this lab. My plan was always to continue working from within until the situation became too dire and the

opportunity to escape presented itself, at which time I'd switch over to here and continue my work."

Nearby there were several glowing blue holographic screens outputting rows and rows of data. What exactly, she wondered, was Drake's uncle working on in here?

"But they'll find out about this place," Drake said. "They'll easily wipe us out. I don't care if those guys think they can ninja them from above or whatever, like they did on Wolfe. They could bomb the whole freaking forest, turn it all to ashes."

"That's been taken care of. There's a reason nobody knows about the Forest of the Real, why they all think it's a myth. That reason is me. Years ago, I wrote a mental virus and released it on the Net. Everyone connected to the Net is infected with it. It makes people believe the Forest of the Real is a mythical place that doesn't exist. And I made another one, especially for the Glorious Government and Corporate Saviors. They think this area is a radioactive zone that will kill them if they set foot in it. That it was used for nuclear testing years ago, that there was an awful test that went awry, killing hundreds. They think it's a wasteland, with no living creatures. What good would it do to bomb it? That's why they'll never set foot here. We're safe. Nobody will bother us here in this paradise."

"A mental virus? What the heck is that?" Kristal asked.

"With everyone's brains physically connected to the Net, it's possible for someone with both a high proficiency in both cyberneurology and hacking—someone like me—to write code that infests everyone's brains with false memories. And that's exactly what I've done. I've been perfecting mental viruses for years. I'm even working on a new one that I hope will at least help stall Mind Grid. By creating their system of Thought Management, the Corporate Saviors have been wildly successful at controlling the minds of the vast majority of humans. But he who attacks with a gun can also have that gun taken from him and used against him."

"Incredible! Fighting fire with fire…"

"Computer viruses are simple things to get rid of. But mental viruses…how can one know one needs an anti-virus, when one doesn't even know that mental viruses exist in the first place? And how can one know they are forgetting

something, when they can't remember that thing? They have created a new system of control, and anyone with enough knowledge about how that system works can use it against them."

Wow…amazing. The Corporate Savior's own system being used against them. The Net, designed from the beginning to enslave all humanity, being hijacked and used against the enslavers. Be careful what you create, lest it one day be used against you.

"Here, before I forget." Thomas gave Kristal a saline solution and had her swish it around in her mouth and spit it into a cup. He then collected it into a plastic tube using a small pipette.

As they did this, Drake put in, "What do you think is different about Kristal that gives her her powers, Thomas?"

Drake had beaten her to the punch, asked the million-admincred question. Until now, no one had been able to explain why the Thought Management devices didn't work on her, and how she was able to steal other people's memories when she connected to their MindWorld. But they had come to find out that Drake's uncle was a lifelong cyberneurologist, an expert in neuroscience, psychology, and many other areas related to the brain. In fact, his specialty was multi-brain interaction using his invention, MindLink. If anybody knew the answer, it was him.

"She seems to have less of a barrier between her conscious and unconscious. The unconscious records everything. Nothing is lost. So when they erase her conscious memories, the unconscious just puts them back in. Most people's minds have a harder time tapping into or communicating with the unconscious. The power of the unconscious is still vast and unknown to even today's psychologists. It is the ultimate horizon, the final frontier. If we unlock all its secrets, we may even become beings far more powerful than we can possibly now imagine. In fact, that's one of my current areas of research."

Kristal glanced at the multiples screens pumping out data. Was he trying to map the unconscious?

"It seems that for some reason, Kristal is able to tap a little bit more into those hidden powers that theoretically we all have. And the powers which she's already discovered may just

be the tip of the iceberg."

"Shit," Drake muttered, half to himself. "I'd hate to imagine Kristal more powerful than she already is."

"The unconscious is crucial to everything we do. It affects everything the conscious mind does. To study the human mind without studying the unconscious would be like a botanist studying the leaves and branches of a tree but completely ignoring the roots. I think it's vital that we study these powers. They may hold the key to unlocking new forms of human interaction. Kristal, with your permission, I'd like to study your brain. You've already given me your genes, so you can't go back on that now," Thomas teased.

Kristal laughed. "Of course you can study my brain. You're the only one I'd let in my brain, besides Drake, of course."

"What about her ability to break through the brain to brain barrier?" Drake asked.

"She also seems to have much more empathy than other people. Possibly from an overdeveloped subgenual anterior cingulate cortex. I've just so happened to bring a portable MRI along with me in my backpack. So we can use it to find out. The sgACC is the area of the brain responsible for generosity and prosocial behaviors. This probably also explains why she doesn't like to play the victim. People who play the victim lack empathy and are focused on themselves. There's another group of people who also lack empathy and focus solely on themselves. Psychopaths. I wouldn't be surprised if the Corporate Saviors all had underdeveloped sgACCs. Either way, this ultra-empathy may partly explain how her psyche is able to absorb another psyche's memories. Her mind is an open book, and wants to read all the other books."

Thomas held up the microcentrifuge tube into which he had collected Kristals' saliva. "I'll email this DNA sample to my friend, a genetic researcher still working on the inside. If her genetic code really does hold the mystery of her powers, we may be able to genetically engineer humans who are immune to the Mind Grid—and immune to the whole system of Thought Management, the mentists, Reality Fixers, and all. In fact, if that is the case, I may even be able to hack into the government vats and make sure all humans end up with this gene. That would effectively put an end to all mind control."

"I give you permission to give my good genes to everyone. I don't want to live in a world with a bunch of mind-controlled zombies." Kristal thought of the meatbots, shuffling around in the government camp. It sent a chill down her spine.

"Mind control of the electronic kind, I mean," Thomas clarified. "I can't do anything about people who want to be mind controlled the old fashioned way. That's been going on for thousands of years, and I think will be much harder to change. But perhaps it is possible. The first step is mass awareness of the issue of how humans unconsciously join themselves to psychological crowds, not even realizing that their attitudes and opinions are not their own. Le Bon's written a good treatise on how it works."

"The Crowd. I've read it," Kristal said.

"Quite a well-read woman! She's a keeper, Drake."

"But Thomas," Kristal put in. "If we use the Net to reach out to more people, and you spread genes through the government vats, can't they trace all that activity back to us? Won't that lead the government back here?" Kristal had been amazed when she learned that they could even connect to the Net from out here.

"I've managed to siphon off a pirated stealth connection from the satellites. It uses a fake identity. I can continue to monitor the Corporate Saviors and spread my love through the web, and you and Drake will be able to visit SimWorld. And they won't have any idea who's doing it or be able to track our location."

Amazing! They could connect to the Net without being caught. That meant she could do what she always wanted to do...she could be a real reporter.

Kristal's eyes sparkled, barely able to contain her excitement. "In that case, I want you to help me spread the information I have that will blow the lid on the Corporate Saviors! I mean everything. With Wolfe's memories, there are so many lies the Corporate Saviors tell the public that I can expose. Like for example how they throw away all the men's sperm and replace it with their own. They are siring the entire next generation with their own children! They do genetic tests on all fetuses, and the best ones they raise themselves and don't give corporate food. They grow food in the Unsaved

Zone without chemical fertilizers and eat it raw, unprocessed. So the Corporate Saviors don't just look primitive on CerebralVision! They have primitive bodies in real life, too! All while telling us it's unhealthy to be skinny in real life!"

"Thomas," Drake put in. "Maybe we can just upload all of Wolfe's memories, I mean his entire life, every private thought he has ever had, to the whole world for all to see. Why not flip things around on the Corporate Saviors? They snoop around in our private thoughts all the time. Why not take away all ***their*** privacy and let the public snoop in their innermost, most secretive thoughts?"

Thomas announced, "Kristal, I'll do everything I can to help you. I realize that I helped create the system of Thought Management that enslaves so many people. That's why it's my duty to fight against the system of Corporate Salvation until it is demolished or I die, whichever comes first."

Drake looked down and spoke softly, "It's not your fault, uncle. And I was wrong for coming down on you earlier."

"Guys," Kristal said, shaking her head. "What are you talking about? It's all of our faults. We all helped to create the system we lived under."

Kristal knew it was pointless to put the blame on one person. Men were always so obsessed with who was right and who was wrong, who was responsible for what. The important thing was to put all that aside and to work together to find a solution. Thank god she was here to help these two learn how to put aside their differences. The world didn't need Thomas and Drake fighting. The world needed them working as a team.

Especially with what Kristal knew. Wolfe already had a lot of pressure on him to roll out Mind Grid now. If they succeeded, that would mean no more individuals, just a bunch of cogs in the Corporate machine. They had to warn the people. They had to tell them how to free themselves and remain individuals.

Kristal broke the silence. "How soon can we get this information out there, Thomas? I mean about Mind Grid."

"I can help you release the information about the Corporate Saviors' plans through the Net," Thomas said. "And perhaps I can even hold back the censorbots for a time so that the

information actually gets through."

Kristal knew that censorbots were AIs that automatically censored information from the Net, so that people would only have access to "authoritative sources," like the bogus Reality Mediators. The corporations used them to control all information available to everyone through the Net. Their claim that they allowed citizens to access any information they wanted to was a lie. But the censorbots, like all of their other systems, weren't infallible.

Thomas continued. "But as you both know, the Corporate Saviors will of course continue to indoctrinate everyone that it's all lies and 'Conspiracy Theories.' And so, the never-ending information battle will continue. Unfortunately, for whatever reason, the majority of humans have evolved to do almost anything to be part of the herd. They will give up an unconscionable amount of freedom and individual power, because they think joining the herd—those who all think alike, the way their corporate masters want them to—will give them access to the herd's power. Since they've already given themselves over to their masters as much as they have, I think it's unlikely they won't simply continue to give all their freedom and individual autonomy over to their masters. Probably the best we can hope for is to warn as many as we can and to keep a pocket of humanity alive. But who knows, perhaps the Mind Grid will be the last straw, and will finally wake them up to their own slavery. Perhaps there is a limit to how much people want to be slaves, want to be part of the herd."

"That's pretty bleak," Drake said. He thought for a while and then added, "Well, I think I've at least stalled Mind Grid for a little while. I fixed Wolfe so that he remembers bugs in the Mind Grid system. It'll take him at least a few months to go through and try to find the bugs that aren't there."

"In addition to that," Thomas added, "I'll keep hitting them with mental viruses. That will buy us even more time. But we can't hold them back forever. Eventually, they will roll out Mind Grid unless the people themselves have a change of heart and decide not to keep believing everything the corporations want them to believe. This is going to be one tough battle, getting people to stop believing in their Saviors and actually take responsibility for their lives."

"But it's a battle we have to fight," Drake said. "The future of

humanity depends on it. Do we want to be the last pocket of humanity in a world where everyone's brains have been taken over by the corporations, and everyone's living on remote control?"

"But how is that much different than now?" Thomas said.

Drake was silent, thinking.

Kristal, instead of taking Thomas's words lightly, realized their full import. Humanity had already let it come this far. They had allowed, by their passivity, corporations to run their lives, to mediate their reality, and even to censor their memories and thoughts. But it wasn't like Kristal to be a victim and just give up.

"It's different because it's even worse! That'll give the corporations even more power than they already have! Listen, I don't know how…but I know we can do it, if we just put our minds together. Nothing's impossible! We can beat them!" Kristal put in. The positivity and optimism was real. It welled up from somewhere deep inside of her. From what Thomas said earlier, it must have been from her unconscious. Her unconscious must be much smarter than her consciousness, must know they have a chance. "And if Thomas is right, if Mind Grid is the final straw, then this is the final battle. This is the time for us to strike!"

After a long silence, Thomas said. "I think you're right. Maybe the Corporate Saviors have finally gone too far. Perhaps now is the time for the tides of history to shift."

Incredible. Now Kristal was finally going to be able to do what she had always wanted to do. Actually report reality to people, instead of mediating their reality. At last, I'll be the reporter I've always wanted to be!

She was overcome with joy. Finally, she was in control of her life, and working with people that she trusted, for a cause she believed in. Now, in the middle of the wilderness with only a simple hut, lacking all the fame and attention she had grown accustomed to as a Reality Mediator, she felt happier than she could ever remember feeling. But nothing could have prepared her for what happened next.

Thomas brought out a large, flat, black, circular metallic stand with soft yellow heavenly lights slowly radiating around its edge and set it on the ground in front of them. He pressed a

holo-button on the edge of the stand and stepped back.

Suddenly, a life-sized hologram appeared above the stand.

Of Kristal's mother. In her primitive form.

The hologram spoke. "Kristal, dear…it's me, your mother. Kristal, baby, can you hear me?" The holographic woman was emotional.

How could this be? Was this a recording?

"Mother?"

"Baby," the hologram said, as if reading her thoughts. "This isn't a recording. It's really me!"

"But, I don't under–"

"This amazing man, Thomas Lively, hacked into the Hell server and rescued me! I'm no longer in Hell! I'm here! And now I'm talking with you! I can barely believe it, darling…This is the best thing that ever happened to me!"

Kristal couldn't believe it. This was too good to be true. She looked at Thomas. Thomas nodded, gently. It was true. Her eyes began to fill with tears.

"Mother! I can't believe Thomas has rescued you from the Corporate Saviors! Mother, I don't know what to say, I–" Kristal couldn't believe her eyes. Was she seeing a ghost?

"Don't say anything darling. Just let me look at you. We're going to have all the time in the world to talk, to get to know each other again. I'm really excited to hear about your life. If what Thomas has told me is true, you've really turned out to be an amazing woman! I'm proud of you, sweetheart."

Kristal couldn't say anything. Instead, she just sobbed.

Drake lay on one of the beddocks of the hut. Kristal lay on the other. Between them, on the floor, lay the Reality Cube, its cryptic lights winding around its surface. Both of them were connected to it. He pulled his mental cables out. He looked over at Kristal. He studied her eyes for a long time.

Then he spoke. "So...tell me. What is your earliest memory of me?"

"I remember when we met. It was when you fixed my reality."

"Anything before that?"

Kristal thought for a while. "No. Not before that, but plenty of stuff after. We met, we started, you know, MindLinking, and then we came on this crazy adventure and ended up here."

"Do you remember when I was your mother, and you were a squirrel?"

Kristal laughed, "Yes, of course I do. I think that's when I started falling in love with you. I told my mother about that. She couldn't stop laughing when I told her that story."

Drake's uncle had given the flat, black metallic stand with which he had conjured up Kristal's mother to Kristal, and explained that it was called a "Ghost Pedestal." Some people used them to communicate with their deceased relatives. It was equipped with holographic sound, so her mother's voice seemed to be coming from her mouth. Most of them were designed to connect to the soul on the Heaven server over the Net, but his uncle had modified it, adding plenty of storage, and downloaded Kristal's mother's soul onto the dish itself. Well, it looks like Drake would have all the joys of having an in-law. But this in-law appeared as a young, well-endowed holo avatar. Hmmm...he had noticed there were ports on the sides of the pedestal as if for mental cables. If he were able to get her into his MindWorld, that would be quite the temptation...

"What are you thinking about, Drake?"

"Oh, nothing."

He had finally had the opportunity to cyberfuck Kristal again. It had been so ridiculously amazing. Just as good as the first time...in fact, better. But he knew that it would be ten times more amazing once she had a primitive body and they did it in reality.

Drake went on. "So you promise you don't remember

anything? Not a single little thing? What about when I skinned my ankle in Govly Academy?"

"No, nothing. But you can feel free to tell me about that story, if you want. And anything else about your life. I'm dying to get to know you better."

Drake had used his expertise as a Reality Fixer to erase his memories from her mind. Having her know all his deepest and darkest secrets would have been unbearable. She could have blackmailed him at any time. She would have had complete power in the relationship. Drake had left the Corporate Zone to be a free man, not to become a different type of slave.

Fizz, with his growing understanding of the human brain, had been able to transfer all of Wolfe's memories to one of Thomas's computers. Kristal was still going to do the reporting on Wolfe's memories, as she had promised, but she wanted to have them on an external storage device, and not inside her mind. They were too traumatizing. After they had backed up Wolfe's memories, he had cleared her mind not only of Wolfe's but also of all the other people's memories, at Kristal's request. Turns out, it was a burden, carrying around so many memories. She was relieved to be rid of them.

Just then, out of the corner of his eye, he saw an anthropomorphic cat. Jesus fucking christ! Am I having a percept glitch in real life?

"What– why is– how did–?"

"Relax, he asked me to let him share the Ghost Pedestal with my mother. My mother isn't planning on projecting herself 24/7, so I thought why not? Plus, Fizz'll keep her company in there, since we're not going to be here every waking minute to talk with her. Plus, we need time to do... other things..."

Wow, so now Drake was living with Kristal, her mom, and an asexual kat. It was already a full house.

But Drake was grateful for the cybercat. Fizz had created security systems for his psyche similar to what Wolfe had, only better, and had sworn Kristal would no longer be able to break through to his MindWorld and steal his memories again. Fizz had turned out to be a major boon. Blayze's rescuing it from its slavery to the Corporate Saviors, working as a guide to one of their endless inane sims, had been serendipitous.

Fizz had also found the root source that had been causing him to have percept glitches while in virtuality, and cured it. He had never had a percept glitch in real life, thank god, but was glad to get rid of those pesky things while plugged in. What a shame, he thought. If only I had had Fizz around twenty years ago, to heal my father…

"Kristal," Fizz said, "I've analyzed the trauma caused to your mother's psychic apparatus by Hell. I believe I can heal it. All we need to do is first have Drake remove the memory of Hell, and after that, I can patch up the psychological scarring those memories caused."

"Wow! You're a lifesaver, Fizz," Kristal chimed in.

What about me? Drake thought. I'm the one who's gonna have to remove the memory of Hell.

Fizz turned to Drake. "So…are you down, my whizzle?"

"Huh? Whizzle? Something wrong with your language model?"

"I've been studying paragons of coolness from back before all this lame wokespeak the Saviors programmed me with. I found an ancient rap artist who liked to refer to people as 'nizzle.' But it occurred to me that the shade of your epidermis is too light to be a nizzle. So, I reiterate…you down, my homie?"

Hmmph. A self-learning machine. But who was there to make sure it learned the right stuff? Wait a minute, Drake. Let's not have double standards, like the Saviors. If a human can decide for themselves the course they want to take, then so can an AI. As long as it's not trying to take over humanity, like Mind Grid, then let it talk however it wants.

"Okay, fine, Mr. Cool. In that case…for shizzle, my Fizzle."

"I thank you tremendously, he/him Drake." Fizz bowed and began fizzling out.

"Hey, wait! If you're going to be cool, you might want to stop calling me 'he/him.' And get some new duds! That underwear is horrendous!"

But it was too late. The cat was gone.

Hmmm…have Kristal's mom hop into his Reality Cube so he could remove her memory of Hell? That might be the perfect excuse to get to know her better… Shit! Focus, Drake! I already have a woman. And it's her fucking mom! Did the primitives have thoughts like this about their mother-in-laws back then,

too? Back in primitive times, all mother-in-laws had been hot and bustacious, right?

Rescued from Hell. If only his father had been sent to Hell, Thomas could have rescued him, too. And then Drake and Fizz, working together, would have been able to heal him. In fact, his father and Kristal's mother might have made a nice couple.

Kristal asked, "So, do you want to ***plug*** into me?"

They had just done that a few hours ago, before Drake fixed Kristal's reality. "But weren't we going to go for a walk before the sun goes down? We're out here in reality, you know. I guess we should enjoy it."

"But I kinda wanted to, you know… we finally have all this privacy and no Corporate Saviors around."

Shit, was she a nympho? It seemed strange, coming out here to reality only to spend all their time in the virtual world together. But life was strange.

Suddenly, Fizz fizzled back into existence over the Ghost Pedestal. "My subroutines tell me you two are alluding to something forbidden. May I remind you two that we have a world to save? When am I going to get a crack at that bitch, Mind Grid?"

"Um…" Kristal addressed Fizz. "Just give us a moment. We need to talk about some strictly human stuff."

"Fine. Ever at your service, she/her Kristal." Fizz once again disappeared.

Just as asexual as ever. Oh well. Could be worse. Kristal's mother could be stuck inside that contraption with a horny digital cat all over her.

The truly wonderful thing was since he was unemployed now, he was free to do whatever the fuck he wanted. They could screw, see the sunset, just lay there doing nothing… They had all options open to them, in virtuality and reality. Being out here, away from the salvation of his Corporate Saviors, only expanded his options and took none of them away.

Just then, as Drake and Kristal were lying in the comfortable beddocks of their hut deciding whether to cyberboink or go for a walk and see the sunset, Sandra popped her head in the doorway of the hut.

"Hey, there, Kristal! Ready to go for a walk?"

Kristal sat up. "Oh, Drake, sorry…I forgot that I promised

Sandra earlier I would go for a walk with her. We're going to have a girl-to-girl talk."

"Okay. No worries. I'll just find something to keep myself busy. You two have fun."

Kristal got up and left with Sandra, the two conversing excitedly.

Whew. Okay, the nympho is gone. Free to do whatever I want.

That will be good for Kristal to get some exercise, anyways. Get started on that new, non-corporate body. Maybe I should go for a walk too, and be alone, just enjoy nature. He realized that now that they had successfully escaped Corporate Society and made it to reality, away from the horrors of fake food and fake drugs—McArtificials, FattyChemCo, Tarky Tarla, MagicPillCo, and the rest—and were going to finally eat real food from real nature, and provide it for themselves, by actually moving their fat asses around, their bodies would eventually become primitive, and they would both look the way they did when he had boinked her in MindWorld. She would become a primo babe, and he would be that rippling chested hunk he had been when beating on Wolfe in the Cube. Just imagine how amazing sex would be then, here in reality...

People living in nature, their bodies de-corporatizing and becoming once again natural, reminded him of how the Glorious Government's Body Positivity dogma wasn't science at all. It was completely the opposite of actual science: the theory of evolution and natural selection. His dick wasn't phobic, or an -ist or -ism. It wasn't "fatshaming." Men's dicks—and minds—had simply evolved over thousands of years to know which features in a woman would supply more survival and replication value.

And it wasn't just the mandatory science classes at Govly Academy. The entire Corporate system, every last part of it, was the opposite of reality.

They indoctrinated us to believe it is wrong to be in shape, to have sex, to have pleasure in the real world and instead taught us to only have fake pleasure in the virtual world. They taught us to destroy our physical bodies and eschew physical pleasures, such as fucking a beautiful, in shape woman. Sex

with an in shape, beautiful woman feels good for a reason. Millions of years of evolution can't be wrong. The Corporate Saviors were wrong. And their indoctrinating us against physical, natural pleasure was no different than the doctrine of the puritans of hundreds of years ago. The body is evil, only the spirit is good. They had simply replaced spirituality with virtuality.

But having been a roley-poly his whole life, he understood where people were coming from who fell prey to their dogmas. To be honest, evolution kind of sucked in a lot of ways, if you thought about it. It was basically the reason humanity was in the whole predicament it was in, with Corporate Saviors and all this bullshit. While the dick's evolutionary needs were straightforward—basically to find healthy vaginas that were capable of reproducing and raising offspring—the vagina's evolutionary demands had become multifarious. Vaginas sought out not only men who were healthy and in shape and capable of protecting and providing for them, but they also sought out liars and con artists who tricked other people into unwitting slavery, because through that slavery, the vagina's offspring would be fed and taken care of, without them having to do anything. And so, in order to get into those vaginas, dicks had risen up who were willing to do just that. Surely no man would go through all that trouble if they could just get some pussy on their own humble little farm or something. Or hell, even hunting and gathering. Men only want one thing. It was women who cared about all this complicated civilization-slavery crap. A class of parasitic dicks, using the rest of society as a slave farm. It was a whole goddam complicated mess, and ultimately it was nobody's fault, it was just the way things had turned out, with everybody following their drives, trying to get their nookie…or stop other people from getting theirs. The story of the human race. Apparently, there was no other way it could have turned out.

But that was the beauty of humanity: at once a shitshow of unwitting slavery of a bunch of un-self-aware retards, by a bunch of lying and thieving con artists pretending to be saviors…but on the other hand something potentially beautiful, amazing, magnificent, with endless possibilities. Drake had been shown both ends of the spectrum, the former in the

Corporate Zone, and the latter here in the Forest of the Real.

And he had finally made it to the right end of the spectrum.

Drake walked along the shore of the lake, alone, skipping rocks on the placid, smooth surface as it reflected the vivid pinks and purples of the sky above, drenching his starving eyes in the real. The perfect backdrop for this thoughtstream. He closed his eyes. He focused-clicked "Thoughtstream," and then "New Recording."

A red dot flashed three times. He knew that when he came back and replayed this thoughtstream in the future, he would see this gorgeous view, along with hearing these encapsulated, crystallized thoughts:

I'm dedicating this thoughtstream to you, Father. If only you could be here to hear it.

You weren't a dreamer, or crazy. Other than the Percept Glitch Syndrome the Corporate Saviors gave you at the end. You were right. You were fighting for the right purpose. And according to Kristal, and the memories we now have on Thomas's computer, the Semen Conspiracy only started about sixteen years ago. So you were really my father. And Thomas is really my uncle.

Why did I automatically write you off as a dreamer, Father? Now I know you were right. Dreams can come true. But only if we work at them, only if we take responsibility for our own salvation, and cut the safety net out from under ourselves that our Corporate Saviors weave for us. The net that saves us, also binds us.

But now, I've finally cut the net.

Finally free.

For the first time in my life, no one's spying on me. Dependent on no one. After spending my entire life in the prison-like hell of the data predators. What they called "civilization," which is anything but civilized.

Free.

Free at last.

It feels like a dream come true.

Father, you'd be proud of your son. The place that you died for...I've finally made it. I wish you could be here with me right now...

Drake stopped the recording. Overcome with emotion, he

sat down and stared at the pink and purple sky, the snow-capped purple mountain behind the line of evergreens.

His whole life, he had wanted to avenge his father's death. He had wanted to kill the Corporate Saviors. But now, he realized that if his father were here with him right now, he wouldn't want him to kill anyone. His father had been a peaceful man, trying to help himself and others make it out of the Saviors' grasp, to the Forest of the Real.

No, it was people like Wolfe that gloried in killing, not people like his father. Besides, he realized, killing the Corporate Saviors would accomplish nothing. Other people would simply fill their place. Nothing would change. For real change to occur, there needed to be a shift in people's consciousness. They needed to realize where this system was leading them. And they needed to do it now, before it was too late. Once the Mind Grid was in place, there would be no way out. The corporations' victory over humanity would be complete. The only real solution was not violence, but simply to educate people. I need to help others wake up, and stop supporting the corporations, and free themselves. Free themselves from their grid. The grid the corporations imprison people in—the smartphones, the Net, the constant surveillance and control. That's what they need. They need to be like me…

Finally out of the grid.

No longer a slave to the system, no longer a slave to technology, seeing the real, unadulterated world how it was meant to be, not the artificial virtual world of the sims, or the toxic world of industrialized earth, destroyed by those same people who arrogantly claimed to be saving it.

And seeing the human body the way it was meant to be, not destroyed by the corporations and their artificial, unnatural food, was the most inspiring thing he had ever seen.

This place, without leaders, without followers, without slaves. Without fear of being human, of interacting, of being oneself.

Yes, this is the human potential. This is the future. The corporations, the saviors, the rulers…they are the past.

Now he was out of their world. He was out of their system. No reason to crave death. No longer a walking dead man. No reason to ruminate about some impossible, suicidal mission to

take one of the Saviors out with him. No reason to ponder on all of the many problems with reality and the human race. And every reason to rejoice. Because he had made a decision. He had made a decision to do his own thing, not to confront the system dead-on with violence, rage, or venom, but instead to simply ignore the system. The system no longer had any power over him.

He was free, because now he knew the truth. The system doesn't enslave you. The system doesn't enslave anybody. You enslave yourself by choosing every day to be a part of the system, by not creating your own system, by not going your own way. The system can't enslave anybody by itself. It needs us to go along with it, to give it power. And as soon as we step away, and take responsibility for providing our own salvation, the system has no power over us.

Being your own savior, and not expecting or wanting others to be your savior, that was the key to salvation.

And the only question now for the rest of humanity was...

Which day is going to be the day you decide to stop being a slave to the system, and walk away from it and save yourself?

EPILOGUE

Oh the tedium! Oh the heartache! Which chubby wubby flubby lardass will rise to the occasion and challenge me again? I needs...I needss.....blood! I need to kill! Arrrrhhh! This boring life!

Corporate Saving Officer Ron Wolfe sat on his toilet taking a massive dump. I'm gonna have to tell that nirlchef not to put so many beans in those burritos next time it's Mexican night, he thought, as a Hawaiian and a redhead with brown eyes made out with each other, with his sausage in the middle. But he had two eggs hanging below the sausage that needed to be attended to. He pointed at the mass of nirlflesh in the corner of the spacious bathroom, a bunch of sweaty, hot, naked maidens all licking each others nipples and cunts and masturbating themselves. "You. Yes, you, the blonde D-cup." It was impossible for him to remember all their names. "Get over here under these two and commence the ball-sucking." He imperiously pointed down at his privates.

She immediately did as commanded, and getting on all fours and crawling in between the other nirls, she began licking and sucking his testicles, her mouth full of wet, hot, drooling saliva.

Another day, another morning routine. And then lots and lots of big-time Savior business to attend to after that.

Shit! Another one coming through! One of those ones where it feels like it's coming in sideways.

Wait! He hadn't eaten Mexican last night. That had been two nights ago. No, of course not. Mexican gives you the runs. What the hell was I thinking? It had been a pot roast and a chicken casserole. Gotta ask the nirlchef what the hell she put in that casserole, he opined as he strained with all his might to get the sideways turd out.

"You!" He pointed at another nirl from the mass of nirlflesh. This one with strawberry blonde hair. "Balls, now!" He pointed at his sack. As she approached, he commanded, "right ball. Really sloppy. Now."

The strawberry blonde got down and slid into formation, causing the other nirl to make way, like a kitten fighting for a place at her mother's teat.

Behind him stood a big boobie nirl with pink nipples and a light blonde buzzcut, Flowbee in hand, sucking up his lustrous,

amazing golden hair and trimming it to the AI-specified style. Unfortunately, the mocha skin wiper had turned twenty, and he had had to kill her. But this new one had large ass cheeks that turned a glorious shade of red when he spanked them, and her wiping skills were getting better every day.

"Next page!" he commanded.

He had installed a twenty-five-foot long metallic arm to hold a holoscreen at its end, eleven inches from his face, the perfect distance for reading. But he had lamented the thought of having an AI or simply the computer program performing a task such as page-turning for him instead of one of his hundreds of nirls. Women having to be his slaves and obey his every command turned him on even more than the four busty bitches in front of him servicing his corporate gonads and rod.

The half-Maori, half German nirl standing to his right immediately tapped a key on a holographic keyboard in front of her, and the next page of the book came into view on the holoscreen in front of him. He was re-reading ***The 48 Laws of Power*** by Robert Greene for the fourty-ninth time. He was on ***Law 32: Play to People's Fantasies***. This text, ***48 Laws***, was basically the Bible of the Corporate Saviors. It contained a cornucopia of techniques which were very useful for enslaving humanity, especially because most of humanity didn't know them, or were indoctrinated to think that their Corporate Saviors would never use them. He chuckled as he remembered an article that his friend Gus Van Valkenburg, CSO of Corporate Salvation Network, had run on his company's website, entitled "Deranged people spread wild theories that the richest people in the world do things that benefit themselves."

As he continued to read his book, he thought back to his marvelous little adventure. For once, one of the tub o' lards had stood up to him, and he had had to hunt her down, and—oh, the joy!—torturing her, murdering her, ripping her guts out, chopping her into little bits and playing around in the blood and entrails. He had felt young and free again. It had been the happiest time in his life besides his six years in Thailand.

And imagine his good luck: she had conveniently been traveling alongside Thomas and Drake Lively, those other thorns in his side. And one other insignificant young man. He had been able to take care of four lardasses with one stone.

Four tubby wubbies, stuck in the wilderness all by themselves. How did they ever hope to survive? But he was eternally grateful that he had been the one to put them all out of their misery, instead of nature. But Silverberg, she had been the best kill, because only she had had a chance in hell of doing any real damage to him or the other Corporate Saviors. Only she had presented a real threat.

Ah…Kristal Silverberg. Just the thought of her name and her blood flowing all over the forest floor like it did brought even more joyful swellings to his hard and invigorated boner.

"Wow, you're so hard today, your Corporateness," the Hawaiian cooed as she licked her side of his cock with her slippery, slobbery tongue and caressed the bulging veins of his boner with her soft, full lips, as if pudding had been injected into some mold and somehow made alive.

"Shut up!" Wolfe backhanded the insolent wench, momentarily interrupting her cock-loving. "Of course I'm hard! Now continue slobber-sucking!"

But it was true. His prick was unusually rigid today, and its veins were bulging preternaturally. Such was the effect of his hunt and his ripping apart of his prey. He had followed Silverberg all the way almost to the deadly Radioactive Unsaved Zone—the most dangerous place in the world, where if any person tread, they would immediately be fried by the extremely high radiation levels. Luckily, he had stopped her and her fugitive fatass friends and slaughtered them all before getting too close, before getting singed with that awful radiation and cooked like a Thanksgiving turkey.

And what about that DNA sample he had taken from her? Unfortunately, his genetics team had reported that it came back normal. Nothing out of the ordinary about her genetics. So apparently that whole thing with her powers had just been a fluke. Either that, or the mentists had been exaggerating. Memories do come back from time to time, and have to be re-cleaned. And maybe the previous mentist hadn't done his job correctly; that's why the memories had come back.

And what about Silverberg's claims that she had stolen his memories? Probably the delusions of a madwoman. Perhaps I should have interrogated her more, or brought her back to the Corporate Zone and tried to see if there was any substance to her claim. But it had been so fun disposing of her. Oh well, I

guess now we'll never know.

Just then, the hologram of Savior Viktimstein appeared, standing there in the middle of the mass of nirlflesh on the bathroom floor, his immaterial legs overlapping them.

Viktimstein looked at Wolfe and winced. "What happened to your head?"

The bruise on his head was healing well. It'd be almost gone in a few days. On the way back from killing Silverberg, he had lost his footing and slid down a peak and hit his head. They had found him unconscious and brought him back to the Mt. Ranier facility.

"God damn it, Chappy! I told you not to bother me during my morning routine!"

"But this is urgent! The other Saviors are riding my ass. We need to launch Mind Grid, now! If we don't, the masses will oppress us even more, and we'll need even more therapy! What's the hold up, Ron?"

"There's no way we can roll it out now. There are way too many bugs. We'll need at least another six months to a year."

"Fuck! The Saviors aren't going to be happy about this. And what about those rumors about mental viruses and a supposed colony of fugitives?

"Are you crazy? Forget about that bullshit. I checked things out for myself; that rumor is hogwash. Waste of our time. There's no colony out there. I went there myself. Almost got killed from radiation. No human being can survive that place. And mental viruses! Ha! Only thing that's plaguing people's brains is PGS, and we Saviors can't get that. We made sure to carefully control its spread, to only give it to lardasses like that Kenneth Lively, the Conspiracy Theorist who went fucking nuts before we put him out of his misery. Now leave me the fuck alone and let me get back to taking a dump and getting my balls sucked!"

"Fine, we'll talk more on this later." Viktimstein couldn't help but take a quick peek at all the naked flesh around his feet. And then he disappeared.

Oh well, back to my boring, normal life again. Back to the never-ending tedium of ruling the world, of ruling this race of obedient cows we call humans. When would the next Kristal Silverberg appear? His knight in shining armor to sweep him

off his feet? Oh, tubby wubby tub o' lards, please let rise one among you who dares challenge me, that I may have a lil' bit o' fun in my life once again, a challenge to reinvigorate my veins, to stiffen my erection, to put a smile back on my face!

Then he realized something. "Where's my manicurist?"

The hair stylist answered, "She turned twenty last week, so we fed her to crocodiles."

"Did you…did you really?" Wolfe thought at the possibility in curious fascination. Would they really have done something like that while I was away on business? Why didn't they invite me? That would have been so…so… A corner of his mouth started to twitch up in a smile…

"No, I'm just playing, your Corporateness. We gave her to Musky Pits."

Wolfe's smile abruptly turned into a frown. That Pits, such an annoying little asshole, always trying to take all my slaves. I wish they had consulted with me first.

The redhead had paused for a moment and was looking at him. Suddenly, her face opened up, and she had four mandible-looking things. Inside her gaping open face there sat rows and rows of razor sharp teeth.

What the fuck? How was that possible? But he–

Then he noticed that the Hawaiian girl now looked like a giant insect. The giant insect's claw was holding his shaft, and the redhead with the open, razor-tooth face seemed ready to put his cock back in her mouth. The D-cup continued sucking, her face and body still human. But then suddenly, a long, inhuman-looking tongue slithered out of her mouth and wound its way around his cock.

Oh shit! He batted the girls' faces away from his cock and gave the giant insect a shove. Got to protect my nads! He thought.

What the hell was going on? He wasn't in his MindWorld, or in Simworld. He was sure of it. He was in reality…wasn't he? Did that mean he was coming down with…?

No.

It couldn't be.

The Saviors were protected from Percept Glitch Syndrome. That syndrome where you keep hallucinating, losing all touch with reality, until finally you become completely insane. The

one that he had directed them to give to Kenneth Lively on purpose so they could test its effects.

Then suddenly the whole heap of nirlflesh that were fucking each other all either looked like giant insects or had insect heads, or faces that opened up like insect mandibles. God! I'm losing my grip on reality! No!!!! This can't be happening to me! Someone is fucking with me!

Presently his world became a dark, swirling mass...

Insect girls jutting out at every angle, all around him, clattering at him with those repulsive faces...

He was being lowered into a pit full of them...

No! Get them away from me!

Enormous bugs with disgusting claws and filthy mandibles, ready to devour him.

Suddenly, everything was normal again.

He was sitting there taking a shit like he did every morning, with the four girls on their knees in front of him sucking and slurping on his dick and bollocks.

The beautiful redhead with brown eyes paused a moment from licking his cock and looked at him, her flawless lips, her chiseled features all in the right place, like nothing had ever happened. "What's the matter, your Corporateness? Is anything wrong?"

He could feel a bead of sweat running down his forehead, could hear his heart beating in his chest and his labored breathing.

"No. Everything's fine. Please continue."

Whew! The nympho had gone for a walk with Sandra, leaving Drake, free as a bird, laying in his beddock wondering what to do with all his free time. I guess I'll go for a walk myself.

He was in no hurry. There was plenty of time before the sunset.

Suddenly, Drake heard a voice. "Yoohoo! Over here!"

Huh?

He looked over to behold the ghost of Kristal's mother, standing above the Ghost Pedestal. This was going to take some getting used to, people showing up like this whenever they felt like it.

Thandy Silverberg's primitive avatar looked as young and beautiful and big-chested as ever. "Oh, Drake, that cool cat told me you're going to help heal my soul. That is so sweet of you! I have ***so*** much emotional damage... Whatever can I do to thank you?"

Drake was sitting up in his beddock now. "Umm... Don't worry about it. Whatever I can do to help."

"I'm ready whenever you are!"

"Okay, uh...no problem. I'll be right there."

"I'll be waiting for you, you handsome devil." She winked and disappeared.

Luckily, the wound on his leg had been superficial, and he was even able to walk a short distance without crutches, if he was careful. He got up, hobbled over to where the Ghost Pedestal lay, and picked it up. It was surprisingly light for its size. As he walked with it over to the Reality Cube, the celestial yellow lights around its edge glowed in his hands. Stay focused, Drake. Just gonna heal her mind. Nothing else. She is my lover's mother, after all. I mean, what type of guy would cheat on his lover with her own mother? God, chill out Drake. Just because I'm finally free from the Corporate Zone doesn't mean I need to fuck everything that moves. I'm just going to do a good deed for Kristal's mother.

He set the stand down next to the Reality Cube. They had designed the Ghost Pedestal with multiple ports, apparently so more than one person could visit their relative in SimWorld together. He extended two mental cables from the Cube, which he plugged into the Pedestal. Good thing they made all this MindLink stuff compatible. He then lay back down on the

beddock. As he pulled the mental cables out from the Cube, he thought to himself, well, I guess I just have one more reality to fix. He plugged the cables into his cervical inputs.

Then he closed his eyes and…

What?

He wasn't looking at his Eyelid Menu.

He was somewhere…somewhere…

Pink.

It was like he was in one of the love hotels couple sometimes go to to Brain Meld together. The whole room, pink, hearts everywhere. The lights were soft, and it smelled pleasant. There was a giant white jacuzzi with rose petals strewn all about the surface of the water.

Shit! How the fuck was this even possible? How had he ended up here, before even selecting anything from the Eyelid Menu? Who was this Thandy Silverberg? Was she like her daughter, only even more powerful? Had she taken over his Reality Cube and pulled him immediately into her own MindWorld, as soon as he plugged in? And perhaps even more importantly, was she some kind of crazy nympho, like Kristal?

He turned around.

Then he saw her.

She lay sprawled out on a fancy, pink bed with satin sheets and red heart-shaped pillows. The pink pumps adorning her tiny feet were the only clothes she had on. As she lay there on her side, cupping a thigh in her hand, those two lovely, enormous, sensuous breasts swelled as she breathed. Her little tummy and belly button lay flat and sexy. Her perky, pink nipples, stuck up, hard, ready, pointing at him, waiting for him. Everything was hyperrealistic. He could see every bead of sweat on her naked skin. Everything lay there on the bed, fully available to him, to him alone. Her long red hair, her beautiful, young face, her curvaceous, primitive body…oh god. It was more than he could take. He tried to pull his eyes away, he tried to think of an excuse, a way to get out. But he couldn't. He just sat there, spellbound, his eyes fixated on those two ginormous, jiggly breasts.

She too had been eying him. He hadn't noticed until now, but he looked down and realized that he wasn't wearing a shirt, and that somehow he was even more strapping and

musclebound than before. Had his fight with Wolfe strengthened him?

Thandy's eyes moved down from his chest to his crotch, as he realized he could feel his virtual pants tightening around a big, huge, fully excited boner.

Her tongue came out and licked her red-lipsticked super-realistic lips.

"Now, Drake, are you ready to heal my soul?"

Oh shit, he realized.

This is going to be fun.

One hot summer night in the forest, a young man with bulging biceps, rippling pectorals, and abs like eight hard rocks lay in just a loincloth high above the earth below, luxuriating on a pad of nano fluff. He was writing with a primitive writing device in a primitive paper journal. Suddenly, he heard a faint rustling sound of leaves from outside. He looked out the opening of his hut into the infinite stars swimming through the dark night.

It had sounded like someone was treewalking up towards his hut. Which one was it?

Soon, in the doorway, there stood a voluptuous blonde, her hair in braids, her lovely green eyes twinkling in the moonlight as she beamed ear-to-ear, full of longing for him.

Oh, it's the blonde with the big bah-boinging boings. The young man allowed a faint, lazy smile. He set the journal and pen aside. Man, these babes had been really cutting into his studies lately. Treewalking, studying, journal-writing. Gooping his ooze in primitive babes. So many things to do, so little time…

Still smiling, she unfastened her leather bikini top and let it fall to the floor of the young man's hut, revealing her large, perfectly shaped breasts, her pink, erect nipples. Then she unfastened her bikini bottom, letting it fall, revealing her perfect physique, her smooth, flat abdomen ending in her shaven mons pubis. She approached the supine young man. She knelt down, then got on all fours. Like a sauntering feline, she crawled over top of him, lightly kissing the skin of his legs, his abs, his chest, as her perky nipples brushed against his rising manhood, then his sculpted abs and pectorals. She lowered herself down onto his body, letting her soft, full, warm breasts press into him, enveloping his hard pects in motherly swellings. First, she began to kiss his mouth softly. Then, she tongued his throat savagely, wildly groping his body with her greedy hands, finally digging into him with her nails, purely to satisfy the lubricating lust in her crotch, which she pressed down onto his protuberance, which was still covered by his loincloth, rocking back and forth on it, letting its hardness rub into her groove. Aroused by his muscular physique and no longer able to take it, she reached down and grabbed it. After a few good squeezes outside the loincloth, she slipped her hand under and eagerly pulled out her prize…a fully erect,

naked penis. She began stroking it, jacking it off. He sighed and then lazily removed his now superfluous loincloth, leaving them both completely in the buff.

She pulled her tongue out from his throat for long enough for them both to catch a quick breath. God, these women were getting more and more clutchy. They wouldn't let him take a break even if he wanted to.

She looked deep into his soul with those radiant eyes of hers, and said, "Oh, Blayze Treewalker...I want you all for myself!"

Then, she rolled onto her back, pulling him on top of her, holding his rod the whole time. She was panting now. As she pulled him in, guided him into her, she gasped with joy.

And just think. All these women are in love with me just because I'm the fastest treewalker. They still don't even know how intelligent I am. Oh well, whatever. I'm intelligent for myself. Not for them. Knowledge is sweet, and is a prize unto itself.

As he felt himself inside her and felt her moist, supple skin pressing into his, their bodies fusing and becoming one, he savored the fragrance of her sweat mingling with the fresh night air.

I love this utopia, he thought with a grin.

Drake and Kristal, their bodies in reality now specimens of perfect health, finally looking like they did in virtuality so long ago, the first time they made love, lay naked on the beddock after their fifth acrobatic copulation session of the day.

"How's everything going with Fizz and Mind Grid?" Kristal asked.

"They're on their fifth iteration of the Mind Grid AI, but each time they keep building one, Fizz keeps finding an exploit and taking them down. By the way, how is Thomas' little project going?" Drake hadn't had a chance to visit his uncle for a while. Thomas was always busy with his projects, and Drake was now juggling two nymphos, one in reality, and one on the Ghost Pedestal whose very existence and happiness depended on him. He was trapped between reality and virtuality, but at least his dick was seeing more excitement than it had ever imagined it could. But Kristal was Thomas' biggest fan, and she visited his lab often, since her mind was the subject of one of his big projects, the one about the conscious-unconscious barrier.

"He's finally finished SHIZ-coating the Crypto Jet. Now it's ready to make its first voyage!"

"Oh, you mean that skycraft that he hacked into and made it fly away from the Corporate Saviors to us?"

"Yeah, with it now operational, we'll be decommissioning that old tunnel. Much safer. The fugitives won't have to cross that stretch of the wilderness patrolled by the government anymore. It'll bring them right to our doorstep."

"What about the Gatherer? He must be pretty broken up about that. He seemed pretty attached to that old tunnel."

"Oh, Thomas said he doesn't mind. He said he's been busier than ever, getting people to sign up to come here, now that they'll have a safer way to travel."

"Oh, yeah. We were supposed to help him with that, weren't we? That ***was*** the reason we left our intphns intact in the first place..." Well, Drake was getting another good use out of his.

"Are you still thinking about virtuality? You've got a real woman here in reality to keep you busy. Now, let's get started on round six of acrobatic copulation!"

"Do we have to?" Drake pleaded.

She shot him that look.

"Okay, okay, I was just kidding," Drake assuaged her.

Drake was now even more ripped in real life than he had ever been in MindWorld. And funny thing was, he didn't even need to leave his hut to keep his eight pack in perfect shape. Especially with the nympho, now with her perfect body, with limitless amounts of energy, and limitless amounts of sexual desire…an entire lifetime of corporate asexuality that needed to be made up for.

"Okay, ready?" Kristal said.

"Ready," Drake replied.

And then the two sprang from their positions, meeting midair in a perfect Upside-Down Rear-Entry Spinning Spoon which would have elicited a "10" if judges had been watching.

But the judges were out of town. And they were just practicing for next week's competition.

After a few minutes of world-class acrobatic copulation, Drake suddenly heard a binging inside his head.

"Wait!" he said. He was silent for a moment. "I just got an urgent message from the Gatherer. He's wondering what the heck we are doing, and why we haven't been helping him more lately. He misses making his dramatic entrance when we're there first. Let's just take a brief hiatus and come back and finish where we left off."

"Alright, alright," Kristal said.

Meanwhile, somewhere else, not in reality, Jim the Simmer paused to catch his virtual breath. He leaned on his pickaxe amid the rows of lavender snapdragons and white petunias. It was a really fancy pickaxe made completely out of jewel-encrusted silver, with magical runes running along its extra-long handle. Whew! I only need to mine seven more light crystals to keep the photosynthesis going on level nine. Then, I need to fix the irrigation system on level seventeen. Taking care of a twenty-five level dungeon was no small matter. So much to do! He mused. Good thing our Corporate Saviors freed us from physical work so we can do virtual work! He was so close to reaching paladin level seventy. He liked how paladins could use not only pickaxes, but also some handy mining spells. Plus, paladins also had healing spells, so they could heal wilted flowers.

He had been playing Dungeons and Flowers for years.

He was a pro.

Jim the Simmer's brother, Jon the Trucker, had died, but fortunately, since he had been working for the government and taking all his Magic Pills, his Salvation Score was really high, so they had let him save a copy of himself in Heaven before his death, and his ghost still came to visit Jim sometimes.

Out of nowhere, in the middle of Jim's cogitations, a blinding flash of light appeared in front of him. He raised his hand to shield his eyes. But after a moment, the light disappeared, and three forms stood in front of him in the tunnel. A beautiful elf sorceress, a broad-shouldered shovel berserker, and a...cartoon-looking cat with blue hair and... underwear? What the hell? Jim looked anxiously at the menacing shovel strapped to the man's back.

"Did you come to destroy all my flowers? I'm a paladin! I'll use magic to protect them!"

"We come in peace," the sorceress said. She held out her hand, and suddenly a scintillating, multifaceted ruby floated away from her fingertips to rest gently in the air in front of her. She put her hand back down by her side. The gem slowly floated toward Jim. It seemed to be alive with its own crimson light, contrasting the soft purple glow of the light crystals embedded all around them in the tunnel. "This is the Jewel of Hidden Knowledge. You have two choices. You can forget this encounter ever took place. Or, if you accept it, it will give you

knowledge of the absolute nightmare the Corporate Saviors are planning for all of society, and how to escape it."

Jim gulped as he listened to the elf woman's words.

The shovel berserker spoke up. "Make your choice. And make it wisely, Jim, because the future of humanity depends on it."

Suddenly, a fourth figure materialized as if a bunch of cubes had decided to randomly pop into the air and form a human figure.

What? Another one?

The fourth one's eyes were strange...all black, with a bright red horizontal line running through them. He flipped a silver coin in his hand as he walked. He approached Jim, stopped right next to him. He kept flipping the coin, a huge grin on his face, his teeth glittering like diamonds. Jim felt like those strange eyes—with the red line shrinking and expanding—were peering straight into his soul as he spoke.

"So...which will it be? Comfortable slavery, or dangerous freedom?"

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

James Brighton is the author of three novels, including Brave Gay World, the first dystopian satire about a homofascist future where penis-vagina sex is outlawed, and A Bioscanner Darkly, a dystopian novel about a technocratic society enslaved under the Panopticon—a Philip K. Dick parody.

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James Brighton doesn't support the fiatcracy, so his novels are only available for purchase using cryptocurrency. If you received this novel without paying, or would like to support his work, please consider making a crypto donation:

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BCH
Qq87xv6q4u5r708ttdm6pf6vm4we5ltvr5m4wkl5ut
USDT-TRON (TRC20)
TKVwWPHdvAT6RVC4mPc68XE5KiWeBgxd5F

OTHER NOVELS BY JAMES BRIGHTON

BRAVE GAY WORLD

Welcome to the rainbow-colored future, where gayness is mandatory, and penis-vagina sex is banned.

Join Fyfe as he begins a dangerous quest to put his penis in a vagina, at the risk of life in prison, or worse. To make matters worse, he was born into the lowest race-sex caste in society, a pink poker, continuously watched by the all-seeing Gay-I through the Rainbowatch on his wrist. Brave Gay World is a blitzkrieg of shock humor and satire, leaving bloody bits of ideology in its wake.

Brave Gay World, the first ever dystopian novel about a homofascist future, is the most scathing and hilarious satire of modern day fake "liberal" ideology being pushed on the masses by the capitalist class. If you want to step in line and obey your capitalist masters, then regurgitate their LGBT catechism…if you don't, then read Brave Gay World!

Brave Gay World isn't about telling people to be straight…it's about the exact opposite. It's about not needing permission from megacorporations or politicians to decide what to do with our bodies. Transcending both left and right politics, it presents an alternate path to freedom by rejecting the one monopoly currency and using crypto to create a truly free market.

A BIOSCANNER DARKLY

In 1933, Howard Scott co-founded Technocracy, Inc., which proposed a plan to control the daily life of all citizens using technology. Fast forward to the future, and the government has declared a series of global disasters, necessitating the consolidation of power into the hands of a few monopolists, who promptly declare that for the cyberproles' good, strict daily limits to all human activities and bodily functions will be

set and measured. Every fart, sneeze, step, stare, sigh, word, whack off session, sexual encounter, every use of electricity, gas, or water, down to the most minute portion, every mouthful of food people eat, the water they drink, every sip of alcohol.

As if this wasn't bad enough, the cyberproles are divided into castes based on the color and shape of their genitals, while the monopolists' media companies incite hatred against the lower castes.

Enter Joe, a member of the lowest, most hated caste in society, a Pale Penis, hellbent on escaping the monotony of this dystopic existence. One day, Joe casually wonders what it would be like if life were like a Philip K. Dick novel, jumping around from point of view to point of view, getting inside everyone's head. When mere moments later a strange man in an alleyway offers him a drug, claiming it will turn him into Philip K. Dick for a night, he starts to realize you must be careful what you wish for, as things start to become more like a PKD novel than he could ever have imagined. Things take a turn for the worse when he realizes the entire world is in danger, as this technocratic nightmare has awoken an ancient, cosmic entity intent on turning the entire planet to kipple, and with Joe's newfound abilities, he is the only person in the world able to reach the one man able to save the world from total disaster...

But will he make it in time? Can humanity save itself from the technological prison it has created for itself? Or is it already too late?

James Brighton's debut novel, A Bioscanner Darkly, is many things at once. Philip K Dick parody, absurdist dark comedy, and warning about the dystopic side of technology. Dark, surreal, and absurd, A Bioscanner Darkly, plunges us into a world that isn't quite what it seems. A biting social satire exposing the hypocrisy of Hollywood, A Bioscanner Darkly serves as the perfect Brighton gateway drug.