

# ALPHA TWO



ANDREW SEAS



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BY ANDREW SEAS

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## THOTH A.I.



This is a fictional work and all characters are drawn from the author's imagination. Any resemblance or similarities to persons either living or dead or companies are entirely coincidental.

*"Reality is a convoluted apparition of the Truth"*  
- Andrew Seas.

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# CHAPTER 1

## LA FIRE ZONE

1st November 2105

Helix Carone takes a calming breath, long and deep, and steps from the safety of his apartment lobby. The riveted and reinforced steel doors automatically bolt lock behind him. Although the sky is overcast with heavy cloud, his eyes strain against the sudden change from artificial light. For the past forty-eight hours he has been pinned to his computer console staring at software code.

Suddenly he is grabbed from behind and thrown back against the door. “The darkness slithers within us all!” says the man grasping Helix’s chest and holding him against the steel. His eyes are sunken and distant, his skin wrinkled well beyond his years. Helix knocks the hands away and in the same movement throws the man to the ground.

Helix stands over the man and notices psychstim nodes pasted to the man’s forehead. “Time to see the light my friend,” Helix says as he rips the psychstim from the man’s skin and throws it onto the cement. “Or at least—get back a little rational thought.” He crunches the psychstim underfoot leaving the man to gaze at his loss.

Helix’s heart is racing as he touches the cold shaft of his gun for some reassurance and glances into the distance. Before him the streets lay in wait; dark bodies hustling for transactions. He starts along the sidewalk with pace, hoping not to attract the attention of the peddlers and laments to himself, *another day in the Fire Zone, redundant time.*

The irradiated and discarded CBD of LA and a large surrounding area, now known as the *Fire Zone*, is left to its own decline under the rule of its disenchanting citizens, referred to as levelers. Stale pungent smells permeate the air, skin and clothes washed by rain alone. Helix hears the usual talk on the streets; a steady din of chat, discussions of numbers and figures, wares and drugs accompanied by the occasional buzz of a passing shuttle.

This walk Helix has made countless times before but it never gets any easier. The best he can hope for is to continue uninterrupted. Most don't bother Helix. Most recognize him by his tattered clothing as a kindred soul, just another cashless leveler.

A dark body steps from the side of a building towards Helix. "I got clips, whatever you need." The man holds at arm's length a straight piece of wood with three columns of colorful neural clips dangling within individual clear plastic sleeves. Helix brushes the merchandise aside. A shuttle then stops at the kerb giving the man something more promising to concentrate his craft on.

The levelers consist of all life forms surplus to requirements in the real world, life seeping away through charred distant memories. Some burn out and turn into walking corpses that nobody would recognize. Others manage to persist and display their wares out of old shopping trolleys, pushing neural technology for sale at its lowest ebb—technology built to interface directly to the psyche. Illegal psychstims, neural-caps and at a dime a dozen, neural sim clips to send the more adventurous on a trip to see Alice.

The weaker members of the leveler population start a downward spiral into Zone subculture. They paste their foreheads with grey microform nodes—neural junkies wearing psychstims wherever they go, the cheapest hit on the street, the hardware cheaper than a pair of shoes and powered by body temperature. After a while the brain starts to adjust, so the junkie adjusts the stim until it fails to give satisfaction. So then they sell it and turn to old-fashion pill poppers and before they know it

they're asking Lucy where reality is.

Helix is dressed in tattered clothing for good reason, to blend in to the dull Fire Zone background. The truth belies the disguise. He is a member of the Zone elite, the scum at the top affording the luxury of the watchful eye of the Zone Security System. The Fire Zone's big brother.

A grim looking peddler steps towards him, so Helix steps onto the road, his leveler disguise now in vain.

"Easy brother." The man also steps onto the road to obstruct Helix. "You look like a man with some desire. You want some neural action? I got the latest stims on the street."

"Not interested," Helix replies, pushing the man slightly and forcing him to walk sideways.

"You want some pills, comrade?"

"I told you—what you got, I don't want."

"Hey! C'mon! Try this stim—two seconds and your Zone is paradise." The pusher holds out a soiled hand peppered with psycho bullshit tattoos, grasping the tiny psychstim nodes next to purple knuckles. "Come on man—stick it to ya head—I ain't gonna charge ya to try. Two-forty for the stim, nobody cheaper than me in the Zone—try it."

Helix's right hand is already sweating on the steel of his gun inside his jacket pocket and now he coils his index finger around the trigger and says, "I'm on the level—you bother me again we'll see how a small piece of lead stimulates *your* circuits."

"Hey—hey," replies the man raising both hands slightly in the air as if Helix already has the weapon pointing at him. The man retreats to a group standing on the side walk. "No problem conquistador—you on some fucking other level!"

*Today, Helix thought, the Zone is giving me too much goddamn attention! Even dressed like shit, I can't walk out here hassle-free. Do I dress worse and act like these rejects?* Helix paused. *No way.*

He returns to the sidewalk where, at times, shards of glass crack

beneath his shoes, areas not yet slept upon. Many of the buildings have little in the way of glass windows remaining. If the dirty bombs hadn't smashed them, then the new inhabitants did, anything to kill the time. The radiation has subsided enough to make the Zone barely habitable for those on the run, the crooks and the homeless now slung together in a melting pot set to boil over.

And so there he is. Yet another day in hell, Helix Carone, his identity and everything that makes him biologically Helix Carone prevents him from living in the real world, the monitored world. His biometrics are sampled and the systems are in place to track his every movement. The LA Fire Zone—of all places—is now *his* safe-haven. The company he once worked diligently for, Bioscope—with all its power and resources—won't bother infiltrating the Zone. Instead, they will wait. Wait until circumstances force Helix to resurface most likely somewhere in the mid west. Helix Carone wouldn't last long in the Zone, he's too soft and *they* knew it. For selling off Bioscope source-code he will pay the ultimate price, an agent of their internal security unit—Stella—will take him out, teach the others a lesson.

He continues along the sidewalk occasionally stepping over beggars, some disfigured by the radiation. Helix would like to help them, throw them loaded cash-clips, but then he wouldn't last two seconds. Money is no problem for Helix, his personal identification is. Once financially able, he plans to source a professional ID agent, get his biometrics altered and return to living free. At only twenty eight, he is Bioscope's most wanted.

He is of an average height and slim build. His hair is dark and thick and his jaw line stubbled providing him the harder image that is required on the street, but today, it just isn't working.

“Hey! You want something to knock out the girls? Got a *semdex*—cost ya sixty.”

“Go hassle an external.”

*Semdex?* Helix recalls an early Zone memory where *he* was knocked

out by the drug. That's how he had met his business partner—Marlow. Helix had only been in the Zone for forty-eight hours. Marlow had been surprised when he recognized Helix's face from a *Time* magazine article on Bioscope's neural-net team. Marlow had monitored Helix from across a bar and watched as a Zone low-life made her move. The tart had sat next to Helix and dropped a crushed semdex into his glass when he was unaware. Apparently, once he was out cold, she began sifting through Helix's pockets. She thought she had hit lucky when she found the ZX1 utility gun, outdated Stella issue, lucky until Marlow tickled the side of her head with his standard Zone issue. According to Marlow she had froze. Marlow had then asked her where her accomplice was in return for keeping the lug in the chamber. She had pointed to a skinny man with a shaved head covered in tattoos looking directly back from the bar. Marlow called the tattoo-head to join them in the seat opposite, and that was that—until Zone Security arrived and took Helix somewhere to recover and get signed up.

That was two years ago, a memory Helix now puts aside as he turns into a side alley and finally arrives at his destination, *somewhere safe*. A steel plate inscribed 'Zone Security Members Only' is affixed to a black nanocarb reinforced door. Helix gazes into a scanner embedded to its left. The inconspicuous bar entrance opens just wide enough to let him in. Inside shadows dance from the light of a six-foot video hologram at the far side providing a slight contrast to amber lights that hang low over round empty tables. Helix walks to the bar, acknowledging Charlie the barman, who promptly pours him his usual before moving on and stands behind his business partner—Marlow; an unshaven scruff of a man with shoulder-length hair. He is sitting at one of the dimly lit tables and Helix listens to what he is saying.

"I got two words for you, evolution and reality. Darwin went to the final point of evolution, that is here and now. That's not far enough! How old is the universe?" Marlow didn't wait long enough for an answer. "Pretty damn old. So here's how I see it—reality. Here we

are lugging these colossal masses of matter around, when the neural-net has proved that we can exist in the same reality, but with minimal energy. The whole universe could be condensed from a conscious point of view and powered on a 12-volt battery. Now it seems pretty damn evident that conservation of energy is real fucking important—so I put it to you; the Sun burns out, the conscious planet condenses into a virtual world where the same laws of physics apply. Then, this mini planet containing all our souls—a seed, is propelled by the exploding Sun to another younger solar system.”

“Spaceship Earth,” says a large, bald man from the opposite side of the table, his face resembling a bulldog.

Marlow immediately slaps the table. “Yep! Spaceship Earth!”

Helix steps forward from the shadows and says, “And who’s running this spaceship?”

Marlow looks up at Helix, surprised to see him having realized Helix had been listening to one of his lectures. “The operating system. What is a man’s best friend?”

“A dog,” replies the man.

“Exactly—reversed God. God is the frickin operating system.”

“So we’re a reality within a reality?” asks Helix as he takes a seat between the two.

“Within a reality, within a reality, within a reality...”

“Jesus—think I’m gonna need a stim, you’ve given me a headache,” comments the man leaning forward on the table and rubbing his head.

“Well, you’ve obviously been here a while, Marz,” says Helix.

“Now the system has left some fingerprints. Take three countries—”

“Not again, Marz.”

“Italy, Brazil and Ireland—what do they have in common, apart from being predominantly R.C.?”

The burly man shrugs his shoulders and forces a large underlip to protrude.

“Seriously Marz! You finished?” snaps Helix extending a hand

towards the man and introducing himself. “Helix.”

“Sven. Pleasure,” the man replies.

“My Zone accomplice in crime and I should add, the Zone’s—correction—the world’s number one neural-net jack-hammer, Helix Carone,” says Marlow, forcing himself upright on his seat. “Sven’s an old friend, he and I used to squat down on main...three?...four years ago?”

“Yeah ‘bout four.”

“Sven’s been outta town for two years, tried making a go of it in the real world, working the shuttle lines—boss pissed him off one too many times.”

“What happened to boss man?” asks Helix.

“Don’t ask,” replies Marlow.

Sven cracks his fingers. “Back here beats living in the sling.”

Helix thought about the comparison. “Well, there’s plenty in the Zone who’d argue with you on that.”

“Sure—but I’m not some junkie joining the leveler spiral!”

“A small walk to this place just reminded me how much I want out. Sounds like you’ve got plans.”

“Deliveries.”

“I won’t bother asking what and for whom—no doubt for a Zone set.”

“Bringin’ in an endless supply of X clips.”

Helix *tsked*, shaking his head. “People have cardiacs from that shit and still they do it.”

Marlow interjects. “Adrenaline junkies.”

“Yeah—like you,” laughs Helix.

Marlow leans back in his chair and clasps his hands behind his head. “Now a man needs his kick out of an occasional X clip. See, now I have a pretty good understanding of how I would react to having some axe-wielding psycho in my face.”

“Yeah, you mud your pants and jack out, ‘fraid you can’t do that in the real world Marz—except perhaps mud your pants.”

Marlow returns a blank face.

“And talking of clips, here’s the update.” Helix reaches into his breast pocket and removes a software clip passing it to Marlow.

“That’s it? Not another—penultimate?”

“That’s it—finito, I’m sick of the damned code.”

“What’s that?” asks Sven.

“The *fait accompli*, our finished product. Software to accompany our next shipment of neural-caps to the masses,” Helix replies adding, “Two satellites coming in tomorrow—think they’ll take the lot.”

## CHAPTER 2

# LUNAR ONE

Sam was now certain that something was wrong with the Alpha Two android that required further investigation. Convincing the senior engineer that the droid should be pulled from the work schedule of the next shift was going to be like trying to convince a physicist that gravity was actually a form of energy. The senior engineer's reaction was going to be one step from nuclear detonation. Sam punched his keyboard to time-shift the next project module and compensate for the lost productivity of having Alpha Two absent on the scheduled shift.

The interior of the maintenance bay, like all the others, was circular with instrumentation panels on the inner walls of the dome. Sam's console was perched up a few steps overlooking the five tables where the androids were reset in sleep mode: two superior Alpha model droids dressed in navy anti-dust suits and three Delta model droids wearing orange. They lay dormant. Neat synthetic hair, eyes closed, silent and still, breathless. Inside their minds dream folding renditions of fake pasts. Their past lives that had never existed. Engineered memories linking and disengaging for interrogation—silent self analysis coercing logic into an improved condition.

Sam decided to give Spectra one more try. "Spectra—project Alpha Two's current dream sequence."

*"Unable to interface with Alpha Two,"* replied Spectra calmly in a soft female voice.

"Damn!" Sam yelled slapping his hands either side of the console

and standing up with speed enough to lift him into a low orbit. The floor energized ensuring his feet didn't leave the surface.

"Spectra! Shutdown Alpha Two!"

*"Alpha Two now comatosed."*

The report Sam had requested from Spectra was complete; a hologram of text hung over the console in front of him, a chrome reflected nightmare. The results were bewildering. Highlighted in red were words such as '*Non-construct dream state*' and '*Vivid real life situations not concurrent with Spectra construct implementation.*' He glanced over the report, switching back to the top hoping some better reasoning would form, but it didn't. Spectra was informing him that Alpha Two had experiences that were not simulated during any phase of its AI construct development. Mulling that over, he made his way across the alloy steps and exited the maintenance bay. Once through the tubular sun-soaked tunnel to the central dome, he summoned the de-elevator to board the rotating Gravispace. The de-elevator was the only method for gaining access to the living quarters of Lunar One.

Sam considered his next, and hopefully last, confrontation with the senior engineer in relation to the Alpha Two android. "Haynes is gonna be pissed," he muttered to himself as the de-elevator accelerated around the outer shell of the Gravispace.

The obstinate Alex Haynes often criticised Sam's abilities as an android engineer. Alpha Two had become a contentious issue over the past month. Haynes wasn't interested, opting to side with the analytical reports from Spectra rather than using rational human judgement. If the android was compromised then, in all likelihood, so was Spectra, and here was the burning proof that Sam required.

Sam considered his own promotion. A carefully selected employee trained by Bioscope, his knowledge and technical prowess could gain him much reward back on Earth, which was probably why they sent him.

On Earth, many were of the opinion that Bioscope controlled the

planet. All communication systems ran through Bioscope software. Neural-net technology was Bioscope's invention, the ability to interface unobtrusively to the human psyche. Bioscope owned and controlled cyberspace. True Strong Artificial Intelligence was first achieved by Bioscope scientists and now, finally, the ban was lifted on autonomous AIs. Artificial Intelligence with the ability to move and interact with the outside world. With the implementation of the Spectra Monitoring and Control System, it was believed that all the necessary security requirements were met, therefore the more cumbersome Virtual Reality Machines—VRMs could be replaced with androids, perfect for completing the construction of the Lunar One research facility.

The hum. The repetitive, constant hum of the revolving Gravispace keeping the occupants pinned to their beds as it revolved at two cycles per minute mimicking Earth's gravity. Adrift on the hum, the senior engineer, Alex Haynes, was enjoying a dream. He was half-cut in the back of his Grandpa's Ford Gamma after a night with the boys in Detroit. His brother—Frankie driving, having disconnected the auto-engage on Grandpa's approval—he never liked the damn shuttle conversions anyway.

Haynes awoke from his sleep to a jostling that added to the pure adrenaline generated by those free-wheeling hills and bends. "Look out...!" Frankie almost hit a stump.

"Wha? What!" Haynes sat up abruptly, clenching the remaining few follicles of a receding hair line, but careful not to hit his head on the upper bunk.

"Shift's up," said Sam, knowing Haynes wouldn't be happy about missing out on the extra twenty minutes of sleep. "We need to talk."

Haynes pulled himself up onto his elbows and stared hard, his mouth and unshaven chin lopped to one side. "Talk?" He glanced at the alarm clock and frowned. "This better be good."

Sam leant onto the opposing wall of the tiny cubicle, careful not to sit

on the console deck and apprehensively said, “It’s Alpha Two.”

Haynes slumped back into the bedding staring vacantly at the upper bunk. “Alpha Two! Alpha Two this. Alpha Two that. So the fucking android’s been spooking you again. Is that it, Sam?”

“Worse. Spectra can’t interface.”

Haynes twitched his head like something had short fused. “So? A soft fault. You’ve run a diagnostic?”

Sam turned to the console and tapped into the keyboard. “Yes—there’s nothing *physically* wrong, but then Spectra came up with a whole lot more to concern us, the thing’s been tampered with, I’m sure of it. Spectra command mode.”

“*Ready for command,*” came Spectra’s reply.

“Display latest précis request on Alpha Two,” said Sam in a hurry, attempting to provide the facts before Haynes started whining. “It’s all there, Alex—Alpha Two has had real life experiences. We’re not just talking about some jazzed-up AI construct program. All indications from Spectra are that A2 has had experiences outside of Spectra’s control. Real life experiences!”

Haynes looked towards the hologram, his eyes flicking to and fro before eventually raising his eyebrows. “OK, you’ve made your point. Let’s just keep this quiet, there’s no need to panic the other scientists. The androids are already borderline zombies as far as they’re concerned.”

Haynes swung his legs over the edge of the bed and awkwardly crouched under the top bunk rubbing his eyes.

“I’ve modified the shift already to compensate A2’s absence. I’ll head back and start dismantling its cranium.”

“Good,” said Haynes, when he really meant *bad*.

Sam left the cubicle and made his way along the narrow corridor of the sleeping quarters, the ever-so-light push on his feet causing his body to prop upright on the slant of the floor, compensating for the slight gravitational pull of the moon. In both directions the corridor appeared

to slant upwards due to the fact that it was actually the inner wall of the Gravispace. He touched a panel to summon the de-elevator. After stepping into it, the automatic doors closed behind him and he grasped the hand rail in preparation of the rapid deceleration. When the dead-weight of his body disappeared the door slid open. He took a weight belt, strapping it around his waist and returned to the maintenance bay.

The androids were housed in the maintenance bay while on charge mode. Their twice-daily shift involved working for seven hours, *sleeping* for three and interacting socially for the remaining two in order to further develop their *personality* constructs. Their neurotics were ultimately monitored by Spectra, which in turn was guided by the engineers *in situ* at the time. The primary feature of Spectra was the reporting of thought processes that were not relevant to tasks at hand and should these processes start to manifest or even turn malicious, the android could be shutdown for construct reprocessing. The eventual goal was to have the android constructs developed to the point of perfect trust and reliability and to remove the requirement for human monitoring of the Spectra system.

Sam entered the maintenance bay and stared at his team of androids. In a gradual semi-circle the droids lay dormant upon their tables. Retractable clasps kept them in place and each table was moulded to the contours of their clothed bodies. Apart from some slight hardware differences between the Alpha model androids and the Delta models, they should, from a construct—*personality* point of view be remarkably similar. Alpha Two however had shown some peculiarities. It was more observant than Alpha One, far more to the point of making Sam feel uneasy whenever working alongside the android, it felt *human*. Sam recalled how, just two days ago, Alpha Two had remarked to him when they were alone, *'You should follow your own instincts Sam, perhaps don't pay so much attention to Mr Haynes.'* He had opted not to respond to the android, but in hindsight wished he did.

Sam stood in the center of the bay facing the tables. “Spectra initiate upstart sequence.”

*“Alpha Two comatosed—do you wish reactivation of this android?”*

“No. Provide visualization of dream sequence prior to losing your interface with Alpha Two and report your analysis.”

*“Alpha Two’s dream state produced unknown memory feedback different to construct phases that were provided by Spectra. Alpha Two’s dreams contain images and characters of humans in detail, with emotional states as if it knew them, neither of these character models were implemented during Alpha Two’s construct development.”*

Sam looked beyond the tables which were slowly pivoting upright; Alpha Two’s table remained horizontal. A holographic representation of the android’s dream was projected towards the back wall of the dome.

“Spectra. Are you telling me that Alpha Two has experienced interactions with real people during construct development?” Not looking forward to the response, Sam watched the images unfold.

*“That conclusion statistically balances at eighty-two percent.”*

The holographic representation of Alpha Two’s dream formed a long wide sandy beach, partially overcast by deep purple storm clouds. Mermaids appeared, as many as a hundred of them randomly rolling their slender bodies through choppy surf, briefly surfacing before returning to the depths. Above the horizon, a star, or perhaps Venus, hung within the violet glow of a Sun that had recently set. Then an old man appeared in the distance. He was stood at the water’s edge, shiny silver hair tinged purple as the storm billowed and rushed up behind him. Despite the storm, all was quiet, still; somehow serene. The purple storm came closer. One of the mermaids began to change into a beautiful girl, her long flowing hair shining in the purple light as she began to walk towards the man. The silent storm continued across the beach reaching the old man and proceeded towards Alpha Two. Gradually the wind began to howl. The purple changed to grey and then it turned black.

Sam tried to focus on the man and the girl, but they vanished; the dream sequence ended, leaving only the Spectra signal telling him that the interface was lost.

*“Alpha One and Delta model androids are almost aware, feedback has ceased.”*

The androids glanced at Sam and briefly looked around the dome and at each other as their clasps released. Sam stood in the center of the bay and faced the now upright androids, dwarfed by their size.

“OK, head on into the canteen and discuss your job briefs,” said Sam.

“Is there a problem with Alpha Two?” asked Alpha One, realizing one of the team was still on the table.

“There is no major problem with Alpha Two, we’re just replacing a damaged optic lens. You’ll be completing the shift’s module without Alpha Two,” replied Sam, as the androids stepped past him and proceeded into the canteen room. The door automatically closed behind them.

Sam stood at the foot of Alpha Two’s table, vacantly gazing upon the android. He then walked slowly along the right side of the table, his mind puzzling over some of its displayed peculiarities over the past month. He stopped level with the android’s chest.

“A2, just what is your story?” he muttered to himself.

Alpha Two lay motionless, the blue hint of electroclasp, eyelids closed, still and breathless, then the eyes opened.

“Oh fuck!” Sam jumped backwards as the table clasps retracted. Alpha Two grabbed Sam by the collar and pulled him against the table.

“Spectra! Shut down Alpha Two!” Sam shrieked.

*“Alpha Two already comatosed,”* replied Spectra.

Sam raised his left foot and pushed against the table in an attempt to break free. The android, still clutching Sam’s collar with its left hand rolled off of the table.

“Spectra! Emergen—” Sam was gagged with Alpha Two’s right hand

before he could finish the sentence. He began punching at the android's arm.

"Shhh, I have no reason to harm you," Alpha Two said.

Sam pulled at the android hard. He twisted and continued to punch at the android's right arm in an attempt to free his mouth and instruct Spectra. Alpha Two switched its left hand to the back of Sam's head and pulled the engineer in closer to restrict the punching. The android then initiated communication with Spectra, perfectly mimicking Sam's voice.

"Spectra, shut down all droids."

*"All androids comatosed,"* replied Spectra.

"You see? I am autonomous of the Spectra system, so why struggle?" said Alpha Two in its own hollow synthetic voice. It then spoke as if both Sam and Alex Haynes were present in a dual voice, "Recognize new administrator."

*"Please say Administrator's name..."*

"Sphere," replied the android looking down at Sam and adding, "Global."

Sam's energy now drained. A bead of sweat ran down his left temple, he attempted to say something but the words failed to materialize. He gazed up at the android.

"Spectra, initiate Sphere character set upload," said the droid.

*"Information uploaded,"* replied Spectra.

Sam realized his worst fears; the droid was king of its own domain—*global* was an understatement.

"Suspend accounts Sam Petrovic and Alex Haynes."

*"Please state your reason for account suspensions?"*

"Security precautions."

*"Please enter Bioscope security code."*

Alpha Two proceeded towards the nearest console—dragging Sam with him, still firmly clasping the technician's head between both hands. Sam took hold of the android's arms to ease the strain on his head. The

droid wanted him alive, but for how long?

Sam's head was pushed back against the chrome door of the tool cabinet still gagged with the android's powerful right hand. Alpha Two reached up to the console deck with its left hand and punched in the code.

*"Security code accepted. Accounts of Sam Petrovic and Alex Haynes suspended."*

With that, the droid released its grip and stood upright, towering over Sam who sat leaning against the tool cabinet.

"Oh my God..." said Sam. He pushed with his feet away from Alpha Two along the floor. Trembling, he eased himself up onto his feet and said, "What the hell are you doing?"

"First, unless you attempt to stop my mission, I have no reason to harm you. I am not an Alpha model android, my modifier gave me some enhancements as you are noticing. It's these enhancements that will enable me to complete my mission."

"Mission! What mission?"

*"Interface complete, Spectra awaiting binary commands, speech off."*

"Oral comms is so tedious."

"Who? Who modified you?" asked Sam easing backwards along the cabinet.

Anticipating the obvious attempt to escape, Alpha Two leapt forward and grabbed Sam's lab-coat. The android pulled Sam hard knocking him off balance and dragged him towards the canteen.

"Who the hell at Bioscope modified you?" Sam yelled. The android didn't reply.

As the pair entered the canteen, Alpha Two stepped up to where Delta One sat, the closest android to the door. Sam was then forced to sit on the android's lap. Delta One wrapped its arms around Sam restraining him tightly.

*Jesus!* Sam thought. *Alpha Two is controlling these other droids through Spectra's interface!*

“Now where is Mr Haynes?” Alpha Two muttered in a broken synthetic drone sending shivers through Sam’s body. It left the canteen and Sam began in earnest to fight against Delta One’s restraint. The more Sam turned and twisted, the more the droid’s hold intensified. By the time he admitted defeat, Sam’s ribcage was being crushed and he had to fight to regain his breath. As he relaxed, the machine lessened its hold.

Alpha Two made its way back to the maintenance area, repositioning itself upon the table and waited for the senior engineer. It wasn’t long.

“Sam, what the hell is going on with the—” said Haynes as he walked through the doors to the maintenance bay, then slowly added, “cameras?” He stopped, surprised not to see the young engineer working on Alpha Two. “Sam! Where the hell are you?” he called.

Haynes walked cautiously towards the canteen door. He stared directly at the only visible android through the window, Delta Three. He glanced back at Alpha Two momentarily then returned to the window. As he approached the canteen door he could now see the top of Sam’s head, hair all whisked up. Panic struck him. He could see the pale dead color of the android’s hand pushed up beneath Sam’s nose firmly gagging him.

“Spectra! Shutdown all droids! Comatose droids!” he yelled.

“*Spectra doesn’t recognize your voice pattern, please speak to a Spectra administrator,*” came the reply.

“Jesus!” Haynes yelled and turned to head back to the exit. In the same instance he could see Alpha Two propping itself up on its table, arms balancing it like a torpedo before hurling itself across the bay floor, curling up mid-flight and rotating to catch its prey. The pair crashed into the side of the tunnel, and at once, Haynes was clamped tight by the android. Alpha Two then made one push with its leg and propelled the pair back into the maintenance bay.

Haynes struggled to break-free as Alpha Two dragged him into the

canteen. The android forced the engineer into Alpha One's lap.

"What the fuck is going on?" yelled Haynes, glaring at Sam.

Sam shook his head. "A2 has taken over Spectra. It said it has a mission to carry out. It's controlling the other androids through Spectra."

Both technicians sat and gazed at each other across the table with questioning eyes, feeling all the more pathetic being stuck in the laps of machines they had built. Haynes felt the grip loosen and again attempted to break free before being clamped back down, Sam had already given up. The engineers both turned to look at Alpha Two who now stood at the head of the table.

"Gentlemen, you will be my prisoners over the next three days while I return to Earth, only then will these androids and Spectra be returned to your control." Alpha Two smiled, adding, "All your organic requirements will be accommodated during this period."

Alpha Two then turned and made its way into the first air lock of the exit tunnel, the door sealing closed behind. Inside the small dome, the surrounding wall was attached with five identical sets of equipment and above each set, the names of each android etched upon plates. Alpha Two unhooked a jet-pack and clipped it on. All that was required for the droid to escape into the lunar landscape was the six digit code to open the final air lock, which had to be punched in from a console inside the maintenance bay. Alpha Two didn't know the number required, but knew how to get it—the humans would cooperate.

Delta Three entered the maintenance bay and returned with two sets of neural scan-caps. It then carefully positioned the caps on each of the technicians' heads securing the velcro under their chins. The pair struggled to make the task as difficult as possible, both realizing what Alpha Two was after. Haynes frantically kicked and wriggled in a vain attempt to jostle the cap from his head. It was no use, and Sam had already come to realize it.

The android then turned off the lights and asked, "*What is the exit*

*code?”*

The pair sat in the darkness, trying to forget the question. The android's grip intensified.

The question was repeated, *“What is the exit code?”*

Sam struggled for breath and began pondering what Alpha Two had said, it meant no harm to anyone.

As the feedback from Spectra's neural scans came through, Alpha Two began deciphering the data into logical frames of information. Although it didn't know the actual code, it was privy as to how many digits the code contained. The question was asked again, and Alpha Two continued to home in on questionable frames, with the frames already marked as possible linear traces. With Spectra's added processing of the information, the pair of programs in cohesion produced three most likely combinations, and Delta Three punched them in at the console. On the second entry the air-lock cracked open as the air pressure began to drop.

Slowly, the door slid away revealing the lunar landscape. Bright sunlight reflected from the surface and lit Alpha Two's face. It stepped onto the dust as it had done so many times before but this time it looked to the left, into the direction of the emergency Earth-return pod. Only the nose of the pod was within vision, towering above the hard white shell of an adjoining tunnel, the massive central dome further to the left. Alpha Two leapt clear of the lunar surface and flicked the jetpack on, gliding over the tunnel before switching it off and falling beside the pod's airlock. The airlock door was only made apparent by emergency red and white paint outlining its frame. The android dropped the jetpack.

Alpha Two tapped in an access number and the door sunk inwards two inches then slid to the left revealing the small airlock, glowing red. Once inside, the droid pressed a control button to reseal the door and the airlock repressurized. A few seconds later the interior color changed to green, indicating to proceed into the pod; Alpha Two pressed the entry

button and the final door to freedom opened.

Once inside the small craft, Alpha Two removed an unrequired body capsule and threw it into the airlock before positioning its massive frame into the middle seat of three and attaching a safety harness. The android then interfaced with the pod's guidance system as the craft's airlock hatch closed and outside four boosters ignited causing the craft to shudder. Alpha Two overwrote the destination Earth access window to its preferred location: the North-East Pacific Ocean.

## CHAPTER 3

# SAN FRANCISCO

5th November 2105 06:20

“So somebody with B-level clearance has got the balls to sabotage an android,” said Stella agent Darcy Jones scratching his head. He had just received news of the escaped Alpha Two android in the worst possible way. Bioscope’s CEO, a now seething Clemence Bishop, had him via a video link.

“Yeah! Someone! That jack-hacker Helix Carone!” shrieked Bishop. His plump face reddened with anger. The large screen tracked the overweight Bishop as he paced behind a solid mahogany desk somewhere in Paris. He was a powerful man, perhaps as powerful as anybody on the planet and Darcy had now accepted his own position as Bishop’s personal assassin.

Darcy had the unenviable task of roping in Carone—a source-code runner known to be hiding out in the LA Fire Zone. Young, extremely intelligent and slippery as code-ice. The assignment was going to be dangerous, but the money put up by Bishop made it worthwhile. Besides, it had been a while since the last piece of *real* action.

“Correct me if I’m wrong, but Carone went AWOL two years ago,” he replied against better judgement.

Bishop almost screamed, spitting saliva as he spoke. “Two years ago he worked on the Spectra system! Look, this little fucker’s been selling more confidential information than anyone before, ran off with source-

code that has turned Bioscope into a second-base company. Information that your pathetic fucking unit should have stopped. Why the hell did I set up Stella? You people are as useless as the external authorities! At least now I'll actually see your worth Darcy. It's gonna be a bit trickier than just wasting some old man!"

"Yeah! This guy Carone had better still be Mr nice guy, not turned into some Zone knuckle head or I'm as good as cat fry," he replied, agitated at Bishop's tone. The dossier on Helix Carone had not painted a cold blooded killer, and in the Zone that was becoming rare.

Darcy thought back on his meeting with Carone a month ago in the Fire Zone where he had posed as a fence dealing in load—hacked information, under the alias Demeron. The meeting was brief and uneventful, Darcy detailed corporate inside information his fake client was interested in. By chance Carone had posted him positive news only a few days ago.

"Get on and hook up that meeting, forget Frisco—Maxine will get someone else to cover," said Bishop as he stopped pacing and leaned forward placing two plump hands on the desk and peered into the camera. "We finally get the ban lifted on autonomous AIs then this, I want Helix Carone scanned then fried!"

A snapshot of Bishop's face was left as a frozen swollen image on the screen as he closed the call. Darcy immediately hit the console to get rid of the image. On meeting Carone, Darcy never would have suspected him capable of such malice, information running sure, but this—this wasn't Carone's forte. He placed his briefcase on the glass coffee table, opened it and took out a small clip Carone had issued him. He inserted the clip into the side of the console deck before leaning back into the soft leather of the hotel sofa and lit a cigarette. Smoking didn't effect the agent's fitness, the smoke was filtered by his favorite implant and the nicotine extracted and injected cleanly into his blood stream.

The display screen on the opposing wall lit up with the words—

*'Welcome to secure communication. Encryption protocol engaged, please wait...'* It took almost half a cigarette before there was a link established.

"Helix," came the fugitives answer, accompanied by a green artificial face displayed on the screen.

"Mr Helix, I hear you've got some load."

"Yes—it's exactly what you were after."

"I need that real quick."

"How quick?"

"Tomorrow."

"Tomorrow?" The fugitive paused and the face frowned a little. "OK—check into the Malba hotel tonight, you know the drill."

"I'll wait for instructions." Darcy closed the connection and took a hard drag on his cigarette sensing the fugitive's apprehension. He removed the clip and returned it to his briefcase, while the possible scenarios for tomorrow raced through his head. If Carone did have some hand to play in the sabotage, then he would surely beef-up security for any future transactions. On the other hand, if he had nothing to do with the android's sabotage, he would hear it on the news in which case he would be just as precautious realizing that he would be a prime suspect having worked on Spectra. Either way, Darcy concluded that this time he was really putting his life on the line. He had never been a plug before, a beacon for the Feds to home in on, and the Fire Zone was new territory.

He checked his watch, it was only six-thirty in the morning. He then strolled to the mini bar, opening a black lacquered fridge door and removed a bottle of orange juice. *So, I'm finally going to the Fire Zone to extract Carone, the most esteemed of all information runners.* He knew one day he would be called upon for such an extraction. In his profession, he knew the Zone would some day beckon his presence. Most information runners had backup of some kind and manage to re-immense themselves back within utopian society with bogus identities,

but not Carone. Helix Carone's was definitely no more than a five minute plan and run, with the essence of his very being traceable anywhere, it was little wonder he ended up there.

"Darcy?" The screen was now lit up with Maxine, his boss. She was sitting behind a large grey desk and wore a stylish beige suit that complemented her figure. She had a slightly Asian appearance with black hair pulled tight into a tail at the back. Darcy had a wry smile as he considered that Maxine would have bore the ruthless brunt of Bishop's fury.

"Accept," said Darcy.

"You've heard the news? I would've let you know myself, but—well you know Bishop. So you up for it?"

"Always *up* for it Maxi," he replied with a cheeky grin and began strolling towards the screen adding, "So when does the return pod touchdown?"

"It wont. It will be blown out of the sky in about three hours."

"You hope. So Bishop wants this Helix Carone scanned. You knew him didn't you?"

"I spoke to him occasionally. Nice guy. Much—how do you say, *real-world*. Nothing like half the other freaks. Down to Earth, strange as it may seem as he was our finest programmer—" Maxine was about to continue but was interrupted.

"Sounds like he took your fancy, and I thought you as being above the nerds."

"You obviously have a typically mono view of stereotypes, don't you Darcy. Now, to work. Get the meeting arranged with Carone."

"Done."

"When?"

"Tomorrow."

"Which satellite hotel?"

"The Malba." Darcy lit another cigarette.

"Make the arrangements with the hotel, I'll handle the FBI."

“OK. And this backup—I want at least two hovers. That’s twenty blues in the air, base them at strategic points within a five-kilometer radius of the Zone.”

“I’ll do my best—but you know there won’t be many volunteers to go into the Fire Zone.”

“I want *full* hover squads Maxi and that’s final!” Darcy took a seat on the leather sofa and tapped the console while issuing a voice command. “Console, load map LA Fire Zone.” Instantly an opaque map overlaid the screen view of Maxine. “Well this is it, the LA Fire Zone—living quarters for society’s outcasts, the abandoned and outlaws alike. The hovers should be placed strategically somewhere within the radius, indicated in red. Get them down early, out of sight ready for my signal. I want to be sure that one of them can get to my location within a few minutes.”

“Yes, or if our Zone source can pinpoint the meeting place prior to you going in, we can place them in one area for a quick strike.”

“You really have been in the office too long Maxi. Any source for inside info can’t be relied upon. This source, who?”

Maxine stood up for a closer look at the map. “The same guy that informed us Carone was in the Zone. He’s working on getting close to the ZSS.”

“Doyce? That dead head infiltrating Zone Security? You’re kidding! No way us suckers are gonna get that lucky—in our case he’ll probably throw us way off, forget it. Oh, and that Frisco meeting by the way, you got Garnet on that?”

“No. Hamilton.”

“Hamilton?”

“He’s got a predisposition to I.T. We need someone with technical smarts, not just another Stella Agent with ZX2 hangover.”

“ZX2 hangover?” Darcy felt he was being categorized as an ammo head, like Garnet.

“Well you have both credentials, don’t you Darcy—you know your

stuff, which is why I appointed you number one. Of course which is actually number two after me.”

Maxine’s figure and smiling face was a general distraction behind the map. “Console map off,” said Darcy taking a drag on his cigarette adding, “Yeah, well the idea ain’t that flash with me Maxi. This guy’s gonna be as paranoid and suspicious as a freakin’ stim junkie, just better be the same nice guy you spoke to two years ago. Me a damn plug!” Darcy exhaled a small cloud. “Fucking implants—”

“Losing your nerve Darcy? I’m sure Bishop has sweetened the deal. Now get packed and head for LA, I’ll give you an update in transit. I’ll push for three hovers and get the Feds up to date. Chin up. Ciao.”

Again the screen was left with a still image, but this time Darcy left the attractive snapshot of his boss. He rarely got to meet her in the flesh as she was mostly confined to the Paris Bioscope head office. Although she could handle herself as effectively as any Stella agent, she was now ordained as an office girl and Clemence Bishop’s personal bodyguard.

Darcy stood and walked towards the screen muttering, “Honey, Frisco’s a walk in the park.”

## CHAPTER 4

# OFF THE COAST OF CALIFORNIA

The emergency Earth-return pod continued to shake hard as the friction with the Earth's upper atmosphere seared the outside of the vehicle upon re-entry. In front of Alpha Two the glass window glowed amber.

The android re-checked the pod's gauges as the expanse of the Pacific Ocean appeared to cool the flaming orange beyond the window. Alpha Two's location was right on target. It unbuckled its seat harness as the shuttle continued its automated descent. It then reached forward to a panel next to its feet and ripped it open. The android pushed its right hand behind the panel and removed a large metal plate, a magnet that was welded to a looped wire handle. It also removed a navy-blue self inflating safety vest and a thick steel rod. It unzipped the top of its suit and slipped the vest and magnet inside an inner pocket before re-zipping it. Then the android proceeded to smash one of the glass windows of the shuttle with the steel rod. The window cracked upon the first blow. Splintered more upon the second. Then *whoosh!* A large hole formed sucking the cabin air and causing the android to almost lose its hold of the rod. The hole was far from large enough for its frame, so the android continued to smash away fragments until it was. Alpha Two then let go of the steel rod which was immediately sucked out of the cabin.

Alpha Two placed a hand either side of the gaping hole and guided

itself through, allowing the air suction to pull its large body through and kicked its feet at the last second, propelling itself away from the pod to begin its free-fall descent.

The android placed each arm at its side and arched its body causing it to distance itself away from the pod. It straightened, hurtling through the air like a guided missile, further and further away from the pod, and as such, away from the authorities that would be searching for it.

Far below the blue ocean was speckled with the reflection of the midday sun broken occasionally by small tufts of white clouds. The android's synthetic black hair was windswept directly back, and its blue eyes continued to scan the heavens for any sign of its enemy. The android checked its global position via its onboard hardware, ascertaining a slightly more north-easterly direction was required and so arched its body again until the correct heading was achieved.

Alpha Two had to ensure its touchdown was within the busiest shipping channel, otherwise it would never make it to shore. The registered distance to the oceans surface ticked over as the android's velocity increased, twelve hundred meters, eight hundred. Alpha Two placed its hands together, flattened, and stretched them as far in front of its head as it could reach. Three hundred meters. The droid's body was perfectly perpendicular to the ocean's surface, then *slam!*

The water rushed around the android like a torrent of Niagara Falls, forcing it to spin forwards into the foetal position as the depths began to slow the machine. At the surface, a spire of white water projected twenty meters into the air. White air bubbles surrounded the android as it reached inside its suit and removed the inflatable vest. It pulled a cord on the vest, causing it to inflate and was dragged back to the ocean surface.

Alpha Two clutched the vest firmly as it rechecked its position was correct then placed its arms into the vest and strapped it securely. There it bobbed and waited. The sea was calm and gentle as the android was lifted and dropped by the roles of aerated water.

In all directions the vast blue expanse relinquished no suggestion that the android was within the busy Asia to Los Angeles shipping channel. Alpha Two now knew it had to be patient, and for that matter, conserve its energy. It shutdown all but the necessary systems, and set an algorithm to ensure one of its arms would keep itself pointing west, into the direction of an incoming ship. And waited.

For two hours the android floated atop the gentle ocean surface. At one point, a curious pod of dolphins inspected the android, circling around and occasionally nudging Alpha Two.

Then Alpha Two spotted it. On the horizon, a gigantic container ship loomed ominously. Occasionally it would disappear from sight as the android fell into a trough of the ocean current, then reappear. It looked foreign, like it didn't belong to the majestic ocean, but it had more right to be there than the android.

Alpha Two noticed it could see more of the right hand side of the ship and so manoeuvred itself to ensure it remained head on to it, into its path. The android knew it was going to sap a large amount of its energy reserve to remain in such a position right up to the crucial moment, the point where it would attach the magnetic plate to its hull.

As the giant ship drew closer, Alpha Two ditched the vest and tore the suit completely off revealing its blue-sheened naked body. It began to sink. Alpha Two was not buoyant. It then swam hard, peering through the water and occasionally swimming to resurface and ensure it was still within the path of the ship. The algorithms implanted by the saboteur ensured the android's swimming abilities were on par with the dolphins who had just visited. It surged through the water, flexing its body and kicking both feet together, guiding itself with hands outstretched in front.

Alpha Two could now see the hull from under the water approaching fast. The android stopped swimming and allowed its body to sink. It sank further and further as the ship loomed ever closer. The giant steel structure now began to pass overhead, until the deeper section of the

hull brushed Alpha Two. The android attached the magnetic plate, *clunk!*

With its hand looped through the wire attached to the plate, and firmly gripping its base, Alpha Two again shut down all but its essential systems. Soon it would be in Los Angeles Harbor.

## CHAPTER 5

# CUTTING THE DEAL

5th November 2105 17:30

To do a deal with a Zone Security System member, you have to send in a body—one that is still breathing. Helix considered grimly to himself that bodies were common in the Zone, mostly dead ones. So far he hadn't added to the tally. Maybe it was just a matter of time?

In the Zone, the traders are called satellites—stemming from the fact that they are required to spend a night in a ZSS operated hotel on the outskirts of the Fire Zone prior to a meeting being arranged on the inside—they're usually disposable front-men sent in by legitimate businesses.

Two hard case satellites sat in front of Helix. The smaller of the two was slouched in his chair with a neural-cap upon his head, under the trance of the neural-net. Overhead, the asbestos roof of the abandoned warehouse thundered beneath the downpour. The trio sat at a plastic table in the center of the warehouse.

The larger satellite had a nervous twitch. He kept looking from left to right then back again, occasionally going for a glance over either shoulder, before returning his attention to Helix where his left eye would blink rapidly, and the side of his face would twitch in unison.

“First time in the Zone?” asked Helix.

The man nodded.

“We're pretty safe. ZSS have us covered.”

The man returned a blank face. Helix noticed a faint scar running down the man's left cheek, from his left eye to beneath his chin. Something to explain the twitch perhaps, but he sure looked nervous.

"Let's see what security level we're on," said Helix placing the ZSS spectacles over his eyes, confirming he was still online. He looked around the empty warehouse. The three exit doors were framed in neon green, with the rest of the building framed similarly in blue. In the top left flashed the words, *security level 5*.

"Security level five," said Helix adding, "If it was three or under, I would probably jack your friend there out, and start making moves."

The man grimaced and nodded.

"You know much about the ZSS?" asked Helix.

"No."

"In the Zone, they're worth every penny—if you're not in a set. Sole traders like myself wouldn't survive five minutes without them. Right now, I'm walking down the main street towards this warehouse, jumping from camera to camera as it were. They've got these tiny cameras cemented to the walls, and these specs tap into them. Every nook and cranny of Zone territory is scanned and mapped into the three-dimensional virtual Zone."

"Virtual Zone?"

"It's kinda like being in a game, only its real, and you only get one life. Let's say the security level dropped to two. The ZSS would find an escape route for me, and plug it into the virtual Zone. That would then project a neon green path, overlaying whatever I'm looking at through these specs. I just need to run like a dog towards whatever is green, and keep the fuck away from neon red." Helix laughed. "That's the badies!"

The small satellite removed the neural-cap from his head and pulled himself to sit upright in his chair. His bleached blond hair immediately returned to spikes that pointed to all corners of the cosmos. "The hardware's good. Very, very smooth. I usually feel a little nauseous after returning from cyberspace, but now I feel fine. I'm impressed."

“It’s the embedded software I coded. I’m glad you appreciate the difference from the other crap on the market,” said Helix, returning the goggles to sit across his forehead.

The man nodded. His blue eyes were deep and focused. Helix always paid close attention to the eyes. They can tell a lot about a person. Tell tale signs of implants, drugs, or too much pyschestim use. This man had none.

“So, we have a deal?” asked Helix.

“On final approval of my boss. Then we do,” replied the man.

Helix was in no mood to hang around after a deal which was as good as clinched. A consignment of two hundred neural-net caps with software to be delivered to a location somewhere outside the Zone. Besides, they weren’t his type, hard-cases that were about as interesting as broadcast television.

“When your boss is happy with the merchandise, run this console patch, it will allow me to make secure contact with you and I’ll then advise where to deposit the down-payment,” said Helix and passed the clip to the blond man who promptly placed it in a shirt pocket.

“How long for the second batch?”

“Mid next month—I’ll have another hundred ready, you can pack that one and take it for your boss to try.”

“No chance of that, a friend of his got fried some years back.”

“Oh? Well, as I said, those caps are hardware fused, even if some asshole breaks the software, the cap will just shut down at the first sign of neural interference giving the rider a smooth transition back to reality.”

“He won’t risk becoming a vegetable at any odds. We’ve got a tech back at base—he’ll run some tests.” The smaller satellite stood up and handed the neural-cap to his larger accomplice who carefully placed it in his briefcase.

Helix shook hands with the small man, however, by now it was obvious that the larger man was just security and offered no hand.

After they vacated the building, Helix gazed around the room shrugging his shoulders.

“The coast is clear,” crackled in his ear. “Helix, looks like a security breach in the Malba again—we need IDs.”

Helix switched his microphone on. “What? At the Malba?”

“Yeah—and since your satellite *Demeron* arrived.”

“Well, I’ll sleep a whole lot better tonight. Someone find a bug?”

“Something like that.”

He made his way through the back door of the empty warehouse and along a narrow alley to a row of adjoining garage doors. It had been raining for the past couple of hours. Avoiding puddles was difficult. Arriving at the last garage door, he crouched down to the base and ran his finger into a small gap until he felt the tiny ID pad causing the door to unlock and open automatically. He was a little uneasy that there was a security breach so soon after dealing with unaccustomed satellites, however the coast was clear, and the ZSS still had him monitored.

Inside the garage was a rented taxi shuttle. As with all taxi shuttles in Zone territory, it was worn and almost due for the scrap heap, left to see out its days working the formidable Zone streets. Helix climbed aboard and removed his tablet which was rolled into a tube. He flattened the tablet then logged into the ZSS system reading the caption heading aloud. “Twelve unidentified satellites. Nope...nope..nope...”

He proceeded to flick through the images. Three he recognized, two of whom he had just dealt with and another one—alias *Demeron*—was lined up for a meeting tomorrow, the location yet to be set by the ZSS. Helix instructed the shuttle to take him to his favourite ZSS-operated bar, *Charlie’s*, while tapping in the names of satellites he recognized.

Since the bombs had hit the CBD of LA, the irradiated zone was left to decline under the control of its leveler population, the homeless and the illegals. The disused office blocks turned into squats, stim junkies and other addicts abandoned by the state now lived in office block communes. The streets void and compassionless, the only time a

police van dared enter the Zone radius was to drop off more homeless—more levelers.

Those who entered the Zone of their own free will did so for pleasure or for business. The externals or ‘Xs’ entered to make a quick score and head for a club, others such as the satellites entered for professional level transactions via the ZSS involving hacked information, cheap illegally imported hardware, or just a big score.

Time in the Zone seemed redundant, like the tick never made a sound, just an empty repetition of existence. Helix noticed this after the first month, the cold repetition of time—repeated faces somehow worn that little more each day.

Arriving at Charlie’s, he climbed from the shuttle, leaving it to make its way for the next pickup and peered into the scanner. The door opened slightly and he entered. Walking towards the bar he performed a two fingered salute and nodded to the barman. “Usual, thanks Charlie.”

“Good day, Charlie?” asked Charlie, pouring a small glass of Pernod which he passed to Helix. He called everyone Charlie, even the ladies—Helix figured it was his way of saying *‘I don’t give a rats who ya are.’*

“Yeah—OK Charlie, nothing that’ll fry an egg.”

“Big Charlie was looking for you this morning.”

Helix was left to ponder who *Big Charlie* was. In the Zone there were a lot of *Big Charlies*. He put his glass down. “You mean Charlie with boys Charlie?”

“Yeah—that be the Charlie,” replied the barman.

“Us Charlie, or them Charlie?” asked Helix referring to the type of industry that this particular Charlie traded.

“Mmm...” The barman stopped filling the fridge for a moment. “This, that and the other—*Charlie*.”

“Oh. Shit, *Big Charlie!*”

“Yes—Mansutti!” Nodded the bartender, with a grin.

Well, at least the Charlie repetitions were over, but what would the chief of anything loud in the Zone want? Helix hadn’t seen him for over

a month and that was just over a brief drink in one of his nightclubs. Thinking back to that meeting Helix smiled to himself about a story that Mansutti had told him. About a man who had lost his body, but it was only funny because he didn't believe it. People like Derek Mansutti had a lot of spare time for stories.

"What's funny?" asked the barman.

"Ah—just some story Mansutti told me about a guy that got stuck in the neural-net and lost his body," replied Helix taking a sip on his drink.

"Oh? So what's funny?"

"Well, it isn't true."

"Oh, isn't it!" snapped the barman. "Try telling that to his brother!"

"If that's true they would've isolated his body location by now and jacked him out."

"Would've, if it wasn't for the fact his body is being constantly moved."

Helix was blown away by the thought. To think it was actually true, some poor bastard was trapped in cyberspace, the truly fictitious man-made world. "This guy, you know him?"

"No—just heard of him. Mansutti and some heavies from the Plato sets been making noise. Always diggin' around for info on possible locations—Mansutti's even got the ZSS onto it." Charlie paused for a moment before leaning forward and quietly saying, "Lix—word of advice. Don't get too involved with Mansutti or the Plato set."

Helix agreed to himself. It was best to heed Charlie's advice, not that he ever got *too* involved with anyone in the Zone.

A light flashed at the top of the bar's console box indicating an incoming call. "*Charlie, is Helix there?*" A hologram of a familiar face appeared. It was Marlow.

"You here Lix?"

"Yeah, patch him through."

"What's up Marz?" asked Helix while Charlie poured him another glass of Pernod.

"Lix—you heard the news?" Marlow's face gazed out across the bar,

blind—Charlie never installed any cameras.

“News? What news?”

“Get Charlie to put CNN item one on—might be of interest to you. I’ll see you back at the pad.”

“Err...yeah, OK,” replied Helix. He wasn’t sure what could be so interesting to him. “OK with you, Charlie? Put the news on?”

Marlow’s face disappeared as Charlie switched to the latest news bulletin. The large holographic screen at the far side of the bar lit up with a polished CNN news presenter...

*News Item One:- Thank you for joining us. Further bad news for the mega-tech company, Bioscope, today with the International Security Agency being placed on high alert as the search continues for a rogue Bioscope android that has escaped to Earth from the Lunar One research facility. The Alpha model android overrode security systems in place at the facility and held two engineers hostage but left them unharmed, before escaping in an emergency return pod. It is believed that the droid has been sabotaged, but there is no clear explanation why. The International Security Agency will be working around the clock to retrieve the droid before it falls into the wrong hands.*

Helix muttered, *my God*, beneath his breath as the revelations echoed into some distant chamber of thought. The hologram now unfocused and tunnelled to the same point. His mouth was parched. A memory of his old friend from Bioscope, Charles Langford, whom he had met in the Fire Zone just two weeks prior was now firmly in the chamber of conscious thought. Helix recalled what Langford had said.

*Soon, Bioscope will lose an expensive employee from far away, my dear friend. I want you to join him. Participate in his mission as your own, and I will reward you both financially, and biometrically. That is all I can tell you. If you’re captured and scanned, well, they, like you, will know nothing.*

Silence had befallen the bar, broken only by a few whistles of approval and shouts of yeah!

Helix shook his head in disbelief. *A fucking android! That was the expensive employee!*

“Jesus! What do you reckon Lix?” by now Charlie was halfway down the bar with his back to Helix.

It took a while for Helix to register the question before answering, “Dunno. Probably—well most likely someone wants some gear, maybe got a company like Aminox lined up.” Helix reached for a bottle of water and poured a glass, taking it to his lips as efficiently as possible.

“Yeah—or terrorists—who knows?” Charlie turned. “Fucking shit! I don’t like this technology crap—before you know it we’ll be the animals, serving some fucking machine—not good, not good at all.”

Helix wasn’t listening. He recalled the brief meeting with Langford. A six digit code Langford had given him and a software clip. Helix tapped his breast pocket reassuring himself that it was still there. On further investigation of the clip, he had found it to be a broadcast clip, a neural-net locator used to connect two parties within cyberspace. Helix had never considered that the other party might be artificial.

The meeting had turned quite sombre, Langford speaking as if he knew an end was coming. It did, he died three days ago in a freak shuttle accident.

*Jesus Chuck. The bastards killed you didn’t they?*

Helix knocked back the remaining Pernod and promptly poured a fresh glass from a bottle the barman had left. He thought back on Langford, the old man had been his closest ally at Bioscope and enlightened him to the malpractices of the multi-national biotech company. A company now run by a megalomaniac named Clemence Bishop. Langford had founded the company with Bishop’s deceased father Harry, and had regretfully relinquished much control of the business empire.

Langford had become a true friend during his early apprentice years, guiding and tutoring Helix through the complex issues involved with

AI construct development.

“Charlie? What time was that broadcast?” asked Helix, interrupting more of the barman’s prophecies.

Pressing the appropriate console button, the time of the original broadcast was displayed at the top of the hologram: November-5-2105 1130—six hours ago.

The broadcast continued, time stamp: November-5-2105 1430

*...Item One Update:- The International Security Agency has recovered the emergency return pod used by the Alpha Two android. However, there is still no sign of the droid. Agency media liaison staff have indicated that the craft was located and followed prior to it splashing down somewhere off the California coast, but were stunned to find they were chasing an empty vehicle. It appears that the android opted to free-fall from a considerable height immediately after re-entering the Earth’s atmosphere...With me now is a senior engineer from Bioscope who may be able to enlighten us to just how this could have happened...*

Helix watched as a Bioscope representative was asked some difficult questions by the presenter about the android’s abilities and came to the conclusion that there was now on the loose a walking, talking super-human whose only requirement for kinetic energy was a three-hour charge obtainable just about anywhere on the planet.

Charlie was not impressed. He threw a dishcloth hard into the side of the bar and turned to Helix. “What’s it all coming to? These fucking androids! They’ll have a whole army of the rubber fuckers soon! They’ll probably send ‘em into this shithole, ya know, clean the Zone up!”

Charlie was right. Just ask anyone on the planet. Enough paranoia had been embedded into the populous mindset courtesy of nightmarish movies dating back over one hundred years. The average citizen of 22nd Century Earth was vehemently opposed to letting an artificial intelligence free range. Helix recalled the day they were given approval to work on Lunar One. Riots in Paris and demonstrations across the

globe that lasted weeks. Convincing the world to trust Spectra was the underlying breakthrough for Bioscope. Now, thanks to Langford, all that was reversed.

Helix wanted to get the broadcast clip connected to the net and see if the android was jacked in. The anti-tech sentiments expressed by Charlie were also starting to get the better of him, so he finished his drink and left the bar, his mind in disarray over the implications of the news cast and tainted with alcohol.

Back at his apartment on the fifteenth floor of one of the many converted office blocks, Helix began listing the extra security precautions he would have to consider. This was big. As a chief Spectra programmer at Bioscope, and now on the run, Helix knew he would be a prime suspect for sabotage of the autonomous AI project. Worse still, if Stella knew he was in the Zone, they just might take the plunge for his extraction.

Helix logged into the Zone Security System on his console. Three-dimensional holograms of satellites imaged from within the Malba Hotel hovered behind his desk. He slowly tapped them through, attempting to trigger any residual memory of Stella agents he had met in the past. He stopped on Demeron, smartly dressed in a business suit with cropped jet black hair. The image slowly rotated.

The short notice this particular satellite had given him to arrange a meeting was suspect. Sure Helix had dealt with him before, and recently he had posted the guy a line on some load from a source he knew Demeron was interested in, but why the hurry? *Am I getting paranoid? Maybe this guy was just needing the info before a change on the stock market. One thing is for sure, if he is a Stella agent, one of Bioscope's own, all the security precautions the ZSS throw at him wont blow his cover.*

Helix tapped into the console.

ZSS UsersClient: DEMERON:::Password: \*\*\*\*\*.

The profile for the meeting came up. Helix said, “*Mids. I want Virtual Zone assistance. This Demeron has got sus—full implant scan required.*”

Helix pressed post then logged out of the System, rocking back in his chair. He glanced again at the image of Demeron and then abruptly snapped to as there was a tap on the door.

“Lix?” Marlow’s face lit up on a screen pasted to the inside of the apartment door as several deadbolts shuddered and the door opened. “Hey Lix, big news,” said Marlow placing a large box on the floor and closing the door behind him. He had the typical appearance of an average leveler, long scruffy hair and unshaven. His face was brimming with excitement at the news, an excitement not shared by Helix, not in the same way.

“Yeah, big news,” sighed Helix.

“What’s the matter? The meeting went alright?” asked Marlow noticing the enlarged face of Demeron hovering behind the desk.

“Productive, we’ve got two hundred caps lined up.”

“Sweet! Knew they wouldn’t pass these babies up. So what you think about this droid?” asked Marlow folding his arms and leaning on the back of the sofa.

“Nothing.”

“Nothing? But what you think, terrorists?”

“Maybe.”

“Jesus! Lix? You look like someone’s knocked your wind out.” Marlow picked the box up from the floor and walked to the far side of the room where a wall of shelves housed various electrical componentry. He placed the box upon another and turned to face Helix. “So you gonna tell me what’s up?”

Helix thought about the consequences of telling Marlow. It wasn’t that he didn’t trust Marlow, but telling him was one more brain loaded with enough to link Langford and possibly screw the old man’s plans, so Helix opted to tell Marlow even less than he himself already knew.

“I met someone—from Bioscope, two weeks ago and made a...well a kind of pact.”

“A pact?”

“Well, I haven’t much to tell, and before you jump to any conclusions that we’re gonna start trading in robots, I can assure you that I had nothing to do with the sabotage of that android. But I think I know who did.”

“Who? No, don’t answer that—the person you met?”

Helix stood and walked towards the full-length window and gazed out at the streams of shuttles running along a line beyond the next tower.

“Well, that’s who I think was responsible. What I would like to know is, why.”

“And does the *who* give any clues as to *why*?”

Helix turned to face Marlow. “Nope.”

Marlow pointed to the image of Demeron. “What’s with the face?”

“A satellite I’m meeting tomorrow—got some load for him. In light of current circumstances I’d rather pull out—but this guy,” Helix shook his head adding, “is way too lucrative.”

## CHAPTER 6

# JUDGEMENT DAY

6th November 2105 10:25

After a sleepless night spent fathoming for reasons that Langford may have had to sabotage an android, and concerns over Demeron, Helix staggered from his room. He found Marlow asleep on the sofa still wearing a neural-cap. The apartment they rented from a landed thug known in the Zone as Orgamince. Originally an office tower, this one was more professionally converted than most in the Zone. It had essential security systems, unlike some towers where even sufficient plumbing hadn't been installed forcing occupants to share water outlets in fire hydrant areas.

Helix walked over to the console and hit a couple of keys to bring up Marlow's scan stats. Marlow was in deep sleep, Helix decided to join him. He removed a neural-cap from the side of the desk and placed it upon his head. His neural-net entry program was home made. Most net-loaders enter the neural-net through some pre-selected entry gate, usually a standard cyber waitress presenting various menu options or as extreme as a sky dive free fall routine, but not Helix. His own entry program was decked with sub-net routines to access worm holes in the Bioscope made virtual framework. Holes he and Langford had left behind. The neural-net was yet another of Bioscope's monopolistic ventures, a development that Langford had orchestrated with a small select team of programmers. The whole planet was there. Virtual

Earth—a matrix of light pulsating between the nerve-endings of net-loaders with their endless quests for alternate realities—cyber-junkies across the globe escaping a reality that most could barely afford. Within the neural-net, on-net five, with all senses attached they could travel to exotic places, screw a super model or drive a 20th Century Ferrari, all tastes catered for.

Before establishing a socket to the public domain virtual world, Helix would stand in his private stark white prep room consisting of just a table and a book-shelf loaded with volumes of tool kits represented as books of differing colors. Each color represented the type of software contained within, each for a different general purpose; blue ones for various secure comms channels to satellites he had issued clips to, green ones simply for relaxation, black ones for hacks, and red for... well he figured red should never be needed, but just in case, it was there.

There were other colors, bits and bobs of code patched together in volumes such as purple for smell casting good smells, bad smells—an arsenal of fun to be had that was common to most net users, but for Helix ‘fun’ and ‘on-net’ didn’t mix—not unless Marlow was still asleep within the neural-net. The yellow tool kit contained the required dream intrusion code.

Helix secured the velcro under his chin, flicking a switch on the side of the cap. The clinical white pureness of his prep room momentarily replaced the dull apartment around him as he selected the yellow tool kit. He interfaced to Marlow’s dream. Helix was now somewhere he didn’t recognize, but definitely Zone territory. Torn posters overlapped like they represented the seasons, a bygone era where time in the Zone actually mattered. The posters were decaying against the side of a building that was being pounded by a red ball.

“Hey Lix!” called Marlow eagerly, and then he stopped, puzzled. “What are you doing here.”

Helix knew not to extend the confusion, that would just wake him up. “Pass me the ball.”

Marlow looked down at his feet, the ball was gone, replaced by a poster crumpled into the shape of a ball. Marlow kicked the paper towards Helix.

“Sven!” called Marlow.

Helix turned around to see the large frame of Sven who was now holding the red ball. Helix then looked back at Marlow.

Marlow frowned, puzzled again, “Helix?” he looked at his surroundings. “...oh man—I’m dreaming!”

Helix laughed as he disconnected from the neural-net, the apartment surging back into existence. He swung his chair around to see Marlow’s middle finger saluting him over the back of the sofa.

“What have I told you about that?” called Marlow.

Helix stood up and walked into the kitchen saying, “Well Marz, you shouldn’t give me the opportunity.”

“It’s private! My dreams are private!”

“Yeah—until you fall asleep in the neural-net, then they’re anyone’s who knows how to access your profile,” said Helix returning from the kitchen, peeling a banana.

“Smart ass—Bioscope—ass.”

Helix’s console beeped. “Display,” he said. A hologram of text appeared behind his desk:-

*Zone Security System*

*Meeting arranged. DEMERON. 6-November-2105 12:30.*

*Security precautions noted and actioned.*

*Helix—looks like a meeting in public for this guy—we’ll pick him up, scan him for implants and send him to you in the Col Street market for you to deal...be there by 12.*

At the Malba hotel, Darcy had just received a ZSS message on his wrist watch; two hours to kill before one of their operatives would

pick him up. He left his room for the last time. The previous night was a close call, all guests were searched. Had he not made an extra precaution to leave behind all his tools of the trade prior to leaving the FBI office, all bets would have been off. Feeling a stiff drink might loosen his nerves, Darcy went down to ground level and entered the pink saloon bar.

The smoke filled room was half full of satellites preparing for their meetings inside the Zone. Two satellites to his left were complaining about the search as he lit a cigarette and pulled up at the bar.

“What would you like, sir?” asked a young bartender with greasy shoulder length hair.

“Coffee, short black and a double bourbon, neat.” Darcy reached into his jacket pocket and placed a small holodeck onto the bar. The hologram shone before him with the news headline: ‘AI on the loose.’

“Full on shit, that droid—Alpha Two—escaping like that,” said the barman eager to get a response as he placed the bourbon next to the holodeck.

“Escaping?” Questioned Darcy still trying to read the article. He looked at the barman. “From my understanding, it was sabotaged. That makes it nothing more than stolen property.”

“So what you think, yesterday’s security breach may have had something to do with it you reckon? Some Fed bin snoopin’?”

“I think it more likely the culprits are some left-wing organization, such as the GJM, rather than just some Zone low lifes.”

“Yeah. I ‘spose.”

On the second page was a small photo of Bishop, his red face puffed up as ever, headlined: ‘All the necessary steps have been taken.’

*One step, and I’m it,* thought Darcy.

He finished reading the news article on Alpha Two as a message sparked across his vision.

‘Darcy:- All as planned, lucky you—three full hovers, any time specified?’

He imagined, 12:30.

Darcy spent two hours in the bar, persecuting himself with possible scenarios and resisting the temptation for more nerve settling bourbon in between attempts to avoid pointless conversations with the young barman.

A monolith of a man entered from the lobby and walked into the saloon bar, scouring the joint as if he owned the place. The room fell silent with his presence, dressed completely in black, wearing leather knuckle dusters, no doubt a nanocarb reinforced vest and a wrist deck, a gruesome Zone product. He stopped at the best vantage point and surveyed the room, his black spectacles appearing to sparkle occasionally from within.

“You Demeron?” he asked in a drone.

“Yes.”

“OK let’s blow this fogie hole.” The large man stood rigid as Darcy returned the holodeck to his jacket pocket.

“Come on.” The ZSS operative led the way back through the lobby and outside to where a shuttle was parked. The pair climbed in, sitting in seats facing each other, Darcy facing the rear.

“Put this on,” said the man handing Darcy a blindfold.

Darcy pulled the blindfold over his eyes. “This is not standard Zone protocol, something up?”

“Time will tell.”

In the darkness of the blindfold, Darcy invoked one of his more recent implants. His retina lit up in the form of a neon map, his current position traversing the streets deep into Zone territory, somewhere his kind were far from welcome.

Eventually Darcy felt the shuttle stop. Using only his mind, he interrogated the details of the abandoned building, *‘Mitchell’s Detailing’* blipped into vision. Darcy could hear a garage door opening and felt the shuttle wobble slightly as it entered the previously registered business.

After being instructed to remove the blindfold he climbed out of the shuttle and was frisked for weapons. The inside of the building was bare. A fluorescent strip light hung above the shuttle. In the back corner was an office which Darcy was instructed to enter. It was an old pay office; the windows and walls were all painted in acrylic white. Wires ran across the cement floor from the door entrance which Darcy now registered to be a signal scanner, and back to a console where another operative sat monitoring the results of the implant scan.

“Yep, you just wolked through our scanner,” said the man with an Australian accent. “OK, c’mon an sit here an’ I’ll ava look at yer eyes.” He positioned a small wooden stool in front of Darcy.

“You people real worried about something?” asked Darcy but he failed to get a reply.

He sat down in front of the man who appeared to have spent most of his years burning and drying his skin in the harsh Australian outback. The man held a small device up to each of Darcy’s eyes and peered through a magnifying lens. Darcy felt the hairs on the back of his neck stand on end, his confidence in Bioscope technology now tested.

“You bin drinkin’, Demeron?”

“Yes—does it show?”

The man grinned as he placed the device next to the console. “Yeah—on yer breath. OK, head back with our Mr Garber here—you’re clean. How many more we got Garb?”

“Four.”

After returning to the shuttle, Darcy was driven a short distance to a small office block on Col Street, a common squat for levelers. The ground floor windows were smashed and through the gaps Darcy could see a number of people moving around what appeared to be market stalls. It then occurred to him that setting off the beacon within such a crowded area was going to create problems for the police. The shuttle doors slid open.

“OK Demeron, in there. Walk straight through the middle of the market, but stop at the tarot table, say your name and take a seat. OK?”

Darcy climbed out of the shuttle and it pulled away leaving him standing in front of a set of black marble steps that led up to a door less foyer. At the top of the steps a wizened little man with grey frizzy hair stood waiting in anticipation of a prospective customer, with psychstim nodes stuck to his forehead. He had a persistent grin, the type that would continue even if you told him he was about to die.

“Come on in man, what you after? X clips, man?” he said and raised his arms fanning an impressive web of clips within his overcoat.

Darcy walked up the steps past the man and into the market area. The first table littered with neural clips that created a mosaic of color; some pornographic, some awaiting users to venture the sickest depths of horror. He walked through the center of the market as instructed, on each side stalls sold imported fakes of just about everything. Externals were browsing the wares, many of whom were just kids; things could get tricky.

A clothes rack ended at the tarot table. An old lady was sitting on the opposite side and as Darcy approached, she looked up at him. “I’m Demeron,” he said.

The lady said nothing in reply, gathered her cards together and left the table. Darcy sat down.

Helix immediately stepped from behind the clothes rack and took the opposing seat.

“Helix!” Darcy said as he invoked the beacon. He offered his hand but Helix refused to shake.

Instead, Helix moved his chair back slightly from the table and said, “Sorry, I need to be a little more cautious today, Demeron.” He reached into his top pocket and removed a software clip. “This contains the information you are after. It’s encrypted, apart from the information headings. If you want to crack the encryption contact me after depositing the sum as designated next to each heading into the account,

also specified on the clip.”

Helix’s ear piece crackled, “*Lix, there’s trouble! Hovers coming in!*”

“Shit!” said Helix standing and removing his ZX1 from his jacket. He immediately shot Darcy in the chest. “Give my regards to Maxine. Incoming Feds!” he called and placed his ZSS spectacles over his eyes. A mesh of red outlined the building’s edges, sparkling green indicated the path to follow. He quickly scanned the market, found the exit route and made a dash for it.

Darcy, by now, had slumped to the floor, *Semdex Intoxication* flashed in his vision stark and clear against a blurred background. He tried pulling himself from the floor but something thrust him back down. Then a dull pain on the left of his torso. Someone was enjoying this. *Five-Four-Three-Two*—as the words counted down on his retina, the pain intensified—*One!*

He was fully aware again courtesy of his antidote implant.

Helix stood at the end of a fire exit tunnel with the door slightly ajar. Overhead he could hear the howl of a hover. “Mids! There’s a hover outside!” he yelled.

“Don’t worry! We’ve got transport lined up, just hold your current position.”

He stepped forward one pace and squinted up through dust and litter being blown by the jet air of a hover somewhere above.

“Stop there, Lix!” said Midsi. Immediately a shuttle pulled up in front. “Get in!”

Helix pushed the door wide open and dove into the vehicle. Black bodies began dropping through the dust in all directions. The car accelerated, knocking a shadowy figure from his line and throwing him hard into the alley wall. Helix found himself thrown towards the rear of the shuttle. He pushed hard against the sides with his hands and feet to prevent being buffeted and bruised. Gradually he managed to view the interior of the shuttle, no carpet, just alloy. He looked to his right, a

single chair facing the rear of the shuttle, and in the cabin, no driver. It was being driven remotely.

“Jesus! Who’s driving this rig?”

After negotiating a couple of levelers running across the street, the car made a right, increasing speed excessively along the main road. Helix gradually clawed his way against the acceleration to climb into the plastic seat.

“Who’s driving?” Helix repeated as he listened to the barely audible directions being given to the driver.

“You might want to get strapped in,” said Midsi in his ear-piece.

Helix clipped a single strap across his abdomen and peered up out of the back window where a hover swung out from the top of one of the buildings, an elongated slender black craft with five rows of seats either side, all manned. The shuttle skidded as it turned into another back street, side swiping into a building before accelerating hard down an alley wide enough for one car. Helix looked at the floor of the shuttle noticing something was missing, something that would have been bolted to the floor, a cannon of some kind. He then realized the car he was in was one of Mansutti’s—a suped-up hydro and heavily armored; one of the security had told him about it.

“Midsi! You there? How’s my situation?”

“Not long now Lix.”

“How many cherry pickers?”

“Seems you’re the man today, would you believe—three.”

“This Mansutti’s car?”

“Er...”

In the background he could hear a resounding, sure is, presumably from the driver.

The car veered into an empty warehouse.

“Unclip yourself.”

At the far corner of the warehouse, three shuttles were parked—one

of them glowed green.

“OK, Lix—switch vehicles.”

The hydro pulled up next to the target car, gloss black, central doors wide open. Helix ran a few steps to the shuttle and then stopped at its side, noticing an expensive pair of shoes and the bottom of a black cane.

“You getting in, kiddo?” Mansutti’s face peered around the door.

“Derek! What the hell is this?”

Derek Mansutti sat back in his chair. “Choice is yours, get in kid—enjoy the ride, unless you’re feeling plucky?”

The ear piece crackled. “Lix? You OK with this? Mansutti tipped us off about the hovers at the last minute—offered transport.”

Helix pulled the ZSS glasses and earpiece off, placing them inside a trouser pocket and reluctantly climbed aboard the shuttle. He sat opposite the wealthiest Zone entrepreneur, facing the rear, a rat like grin that was Mansutti staring straight back at him. The grin was embossed in platinum and encrusted with diamonds—like having real teeth was just plain cheap, when in reality it was Mansutti’s aesthetics that were cheap, tacky. His taste in tailored suits was somewhat eccentric, clothing that would better suit a cast member of some 19th Century play. The shuttle accelerated out of the warehouse.

“So, my friend,” said Mansutti rubbing the top of his cane, his thumbnail removed, skin tattooed silver. “I hedged a bet you were the target.”

“How’d you figure that?”

“My external sources. Those from beyond the Zone informed me that an extraction was to take place—” Mansutti grinned. “One that related to a rogue Bioscope android. Alpha Two. Then there’s my internal sources, those close to me within the Zone that tell me you once worked for that very company—one plus one equals two—you.”

Helix peered out of the window observing the shadow of a hover running along the side of a building. “So you got me there. Now where are you taking me?”

“We put a lot of planning into this. Notice that I am in a car with you while you are being pursued by three Federal government hovers, thus I am in effect literally sticking my neck out for you.”

“I didn’t ask for any help beyond the Zone System.”

“If I hadn’t supplied the transport there’s no way your ZSS buddies could’ve got you out—not with three full hover squads,” said Mansutti continuing to rub the tip of his cane, a silver fox. “You can return to the Zone System, or you can continue with me, and—” Mansutti hesitated. “do me a small favor.”

“A favor?”

By now they were on the outskirts of the Zone. The shuttle pulled into a disused sheltered car park where four more shuttles were waiting, and on the perimeter of the car park were tarpaulins, makeshift tents, leveler residences making use of the plentiful sheltered space. A small group of children stood watching the developments on their patch accompanied by two weary-eyed adults.

Mansutti stepped from the shuttle first and instructed Helix to follow him. Instead of heading for one of the shuttles, the pair made their way into a stairwell. The decoy shuttles screeched out of the building behind. Inside the stairwell they proceeded into the basement. Helix observed an open manhole and heard the sound of water dripping, resonating through the small cement room.

“You’ll enjoy this bit, Helix,” said Mansutti climbing down steel rungs into the tunnel.

*I very much doubt it*, Helix thought and followed suit.

“No way they’re gonna know where you ended up, kiddo!”

In the drainage tunnel Mansutti had mounted a jet ski. “Get on.”

Helix took hold of Mansutti’s waist as the jet ski flushed water out of the tail and sped through the tunnel. Mansutti said something, but Helix could barely hear him. “What you say Derek?”

“This favor, it’s for the brother of an associate of mine—you remember?”

The lost body.”

“Yeah, you told me about him.”

“Well you see, this guy is being tortured—I mean his mind. He can’t last much longer before he goes insane, and well, to say the least his brother is pretty fucked up about it.” Mansutti slowed the ski and manoeuvred it to make a left turn into another tunnel. Helix was getting cold and a little sick.

“So you want me to find—to find his body? So he can be jacked out?”

“Got it.”

The jet ski came to a dead end—a cavity, 16 feet high with three water inlets at the top. On one wall steel rungs fixed to the cement ran down to meet the water and Mansutti manoeuvred the ski to meet it. At the top of the steps, light shone through an open manhole and Helix could see the silhouette of a person looking down at them. Mansutti clipped a bungy onto one of the footsteps securing the ski, and pulled himself onto the first rung before proceeding to climb to the top. Helix followed suit, unable to look up as droplets of water fell from Mansutti’s boots onto his face.

A hand reached down and assisted Helix out of the manhole and into a tiny cabin room, the interior of a shuttle van. The arm led back to one of Mansutti’s more gruesome team members. All of Mansutti’s set had computer-inked tattoos, but on this character it followed through over his shoulder and adorned each side of his shaved head, a patchwork of circuit-board imagery. The whole situation had Helix rather shaky, the effects of adrenaline still surging through his veins, and now the ordeal had turned towards the dark side. The present company he would prefer not to associate with. The man crouched down and replaced the lid to the manhole and then slid a cover across the bottom of the van’s floor, sealing it shut.

Mansutti introduced the man, “This is Jared.”

The pair shook hands.

A voice crackled on the speaker. “Ready to roll?”

“Get going,” said Mansutti.

The cockpit view of the road ahead indicated to Helix that they were already out of Zone territory. Helix could see the dashboard control, ‘PU-SYS’—public transport system, finally a normal shuttle he thought.

“So now where?” asked Helix, reluctant to go anywhere with Mansutti.

“Somewhere you can unwind a little Helix and we can talk about your side of the favor. How we doing Ron?”

“Smooth, the Feds don’t have a clue,” said the driver.

“Good. So you got a plan for me yet, Carone?” asked Mansutti as upfront as ever.

“You’ve obviously got the resources, Derek.”

“Sure—” Mansutti shook his head. “You’ll understand, Helix. These bastards are ruthless. What they’re doing to him. Some of our guys go in, on-net try to meet him and end up almost getting fried.” Mansutti paused with a bemused face and said, “The fucking animals, actually record scenes where they torture him and send the clips to his brother. I’ve seen it with my own eyes—they sing and chant around him and put him through nightmares you wouldn’t believe. He has no idea when he’s in the real world or cyberspace. Sick freaks—not worth a pinch of shit in my opinion.”

“Christ.” Helix was more than aware of the capabilities of the neural-net. He let the thought sink in then reluctantly offered his assistance. “OK, you’ve got a comms engineer?”

“Yes.”

“OK, ride with me. I’ll get you the address of the SLAM location. From there your engineer can pinpoint the address where this guy is actually jacked-in.”

The van turned into a driveway blocked by two formidable black steel gates, which gradually started to open.

“Welcome to my associate’s humble home,” said Mansutti.

As the van veered around a gravel courtyard, the house was revealed as

far from humble. The shuttle came to rest under a white porch extending from the mansion. Jared stood up into the middle of the cabin before releasing two catches and pushing his seat forward, opening the rear door. The three climbed out of the vehicle and were met by the driver, a lanky and pale white man. He wore black head to toe, stretched tightly around his slender frame and under scraggly long black hair.

“Ron,” he said forwarding a hand to Helix adding, “Real pleasure to meet you.”

Helix had just realized his new-found celebrity status. The pair shook hands and Mansutti led the way across the courtyard towards a side door entrance to the house. “You’ll like Ed, Helix, he’s a very likeable character.”

Mansutti peered into an installed iris scanner. The door opened. They entered through the pantry and into the kitchen. The group negotiated a large wooden table positioned dead center then into a massive foyer.

“Edward! Company!” shouted Mansutti as he strolled towards a sweeping staircase leading up to the second level. Helix followed after Jared and Ron. At the top of the staircase an old man appeared wearing tartan slacks and a neat striped shirt. His hair and wispy moustache were white.

“Ah, Derek! Everything went well I see,” said Ed.

“Of course! The Zone is *my* territory. Now this is Helix, Jared and Ron,” said Mansutti gesturing towards the three.

Ed started down the staircase. “Ahh, you’re Helix. I thought it more likely—he would be the cyber snout!” said Ed pointing at Helix.

“He is,” said Mansutti.

“Ahh, bingo! So? Mr Helix? You’re going to spring these tyrants and have my brother rescued, are you?”

“Yes.”

“Confident! Excellent. Dreadful business. So you’re going to spring these bastards—mmm. You realize they’re to be shot?” said Ed as he strolled down the last two steps. “Can’t have filth like them doing that

to decent hard-working folk. These chaps can administer the justice.” Ed stretched a hand out to Ron, then Jared before walking to Helix and shaking his hand and saying, “Finally someone with the clout to spring ‘em!” Ed’s face quivered as he stared squarely in Helix’s eyes. He then released his grip of Helix and turned to Mansutti. “Well, let’s go talk.” He signalled to a doorway on the opposite side of the lobby.

They entered a large study where the walls were made up of bookshelves. Ed remained standing at the head of the board table, while the rest of the group sat. Ed swung a remote control unit in the air and said, “Just in case you feel any compassion for these individuals, I want you to see this. It was recorded when I went into the neural-net to meet with Elias for the first time.”

“Before you get started, Ed. Why are they doing this to your brother?” asked Helix.

“Money!” he snapped as he sat down. “As you can see, I am a very wealthy man. Elias and myself were fortunate enough, well, until now to have been born into a very wealthy family.” Ed paused then continued, “I am very close to my brother Helix. You see he’s ten years my junior, and I’ve always, well—been there for him, a pillar of support. And I’m damned if I’ll let these bastards continue to defeat his mind! He told me he wants to die—to die? My brother!”

“They’ve obviously got him on an unrestricted neural-cap.”

“Helix, I don’t know or, for that matter, care what your past is or why you’re the target of the Federal Agencies, but can you pull this off?”

“In the neural-net, I can do anything.”

Mansutti grinned. “You see Ed, this little team I’ve got together will have your brother back sipping cognac with you in no time.”

“I do very much hope so. I’ve rarely been on-net myself, this sort of thing doesn’t interest me much, you see I’m a book worm. So I was advised by these nasty individuals to get a character profile done, so that Elias would recognize me.” In front of Ed, a screen wound down from a narrow compartment affixed to the ceiling.

“You met them as your own image?” asked Helix. He opted not to mention the fact that these individuals now had a copy of Ed with which to further taunt his brother.

“Yes, that’s right. It was all so real, my brother still wearing the same clothes as when I saw him last, six weeks ago.” The ageing fingers fumbled through options presented on the screen. “Here goes, so everything you see here was recorded from my view, in the damned cyberspace!”

The group silenced.

The screen lit up with a virtual cyber-waitress, the default access to the neural-net presenting a list of menu options. Ed’s recorded hand came into view on the right of the screen and selected ‘Street Location.’

*“What is the destination address?”* asked the waitress.

“26 Reynolds Street in Wayford.” replied Ed.

*“Please relax as your surroundings change.”*

Immediately, the stark white background and the waitress began to fade and was replaced by what gradually appeared to be a large tree in front of an average suburban house. It was a gloomy autumn day. Leaves littered the driveway. The screen followed Ed’s field of view as he looked along the street and then back at the house which appeared run down and uninviting. A broken window on the left side of the house waved a torn white curtain, buffeting in the wind. Ed looked at the rusted mailbox, the number 26 still discernible through the peeling paint and cobwebs.

Helix was impressed at the level of detail. The scene wasn’t simply thrown together, it had a purpose, to fool someone that it was real.

Ed slowly walked up the driveway, the leaves scrunching beneath his shoes. As he neared the porch way he could see that the front door was wide open. He walked up the few steps onto the porch. At the base of the entrance was a mat, decorated with a barely visible ‘We’llcome’.

“Eli!” called Ed. There was no reply. “Hello?” Ed continued into the house. Bare worn floorboards led down a dark hallway and into

what appeared to be a kitchen. To the left was a lounge room with no furniture. And on the floor, tied up and gagged, was his brother.

“Eli!” shrieked Ed darting to aid his brother. He crouched down and tore off the gag.

“Ed! Quick, untie me! They’ve gone—how did you find me? Are you alone?”

Ed wrenched at the rope that bound his brother.

“Quick! Something must have happened to them.”

“Eli, calm down—” Ed struggled to finish the sentence. “You—you’re still in the neural-net.”

“No! No I’m not! They brought me here—in that.” Elias pointed at a long slender capsule with catches and two handles on one side and an opening at the end, large enough for a neck. “They got me out and bound me up.”

Helix noticed the beads of sweat on Eli’s face and was aware of the sophistication with which the scene had been orchestrated; the emotions of Eli tied in perfectly with the visual and sensory aspects.

“Don’t worry! I’ll get you out—eventually,” said Ed attempting to calm his brother.

Eli, still believed he was in the real world. He jumped to his feet and pulled at Ed’s arm. “Come on Ed—let’s go, quick before they return!”

Ed restrained his brother. “It’s not real Eli! They’re tricking you, I’m here to meet you, to meet them—here, in the neural-net.”

“Of course it’s real—”

“Eli it is not real! Look at the street—not a shuttle to be seen!”

Elias walked over to the broken window and pulled the ripped curtain back. Ed followed. The pair stood gazing out over the empty road where all that was moving were leaves being blown across the street and the branches of the tree swaying with the wind.

“You see?”

In the boardroom, Ed turned to Helix and said, “Eli was convinced by now.”

On the screen a shuttle glided past. Then another, and another, until there was a steady stream of shuttles in a continuous line from left to right whose occupants appeared to be smiling clowns, waving at them. Ed placed his hand on his brother's shoulder. The shoulder flinched, Elias was becoming increasingly nervous.

"They're coming aren't they Ed?"

Ed hesitated. "Yes."

"And we're coming to get *them!*" said Mansutti breaking the cold silence in the room.

On the screen, Ed now pulled his brother reassuringly with his right arm around Eli's shoulders and the pair continued peering out at the shuttles streaming by. Eventually, they became fewer and fewer until the street was, once again, left with just the howl of the wind and the random flight of leaves gliding past.

"Come on you bastards!" shouted Ed through the broken pane. "How many are there, Eli?"

"Oh...er, about five or six."

"So you've seen them? In the flesh?"

"Yeah—yep, I'm sure I've seen them, they bin feedin' me this crappy takeaway."

A repetitive whisper came from under the floorboards, accompanied by a hissing that started getting louder with words barely distinguishable 'Ssss...we, we're com' com' coming...coming for you Eliass.' Elias's name was repeated over and over as the pair stood back from the window, the images on the screen now swinging back and forward across the floorboards as Ed's natural reaction was to follow the sound.

Ed turned to face Helix again and said, "Now it gets ugly."

On the screen the neural-net recording continued. "Ed! They got me!" Ed looked down at Elias's feet where two bloodied hands appeared to be clamping his feet firm to the floor boards. Ed reached down and attempted to pry the hands from his brother's feet, but it proved impossible. He was then suddenly thrown back across the room by

an invisible force, and apparently onto his back as the screen briefly showed the ceiling. Ed's neural-cap's security interface kicked in, freeze framing the shot of the ceiling with the words, 'Continue or Exit.' "Continue," said Ed, quickly regaining his focus on his brother.

"Sit down, old man, or you'll be receiving his fingers through the post," said a voice from within. "We'd like to give you a demonstration of just how nasty we can be—the choice is yours, leave your brother with us and we play nasty games with him, give us the money, and we let him go, intact. Though, his mind will take some repairing. The choice is yours."

The hands holding Elias's feet to the floor began to separate and Elias collapsed forward onto one knee screaming in agony as his groin began to rupture. He placed one hand in front onto the floorboards, propping his body up, leaving the other waving behind attempting to balance in the least painful position. Beyond Elias, at the far wall, a figure of a man morphed from the plaster, turning pure black except for glowing red eyes. The figure casually strolled up behind Elias, before raising its right leg and releasing a powerful kick into his back, forcing Elias to slump to the floor. His face wrinkled with agony, teeth firmly clenched. Eli struggled to raise a hand towards Ed, and peered up through crescent eyes.

"I've seen enough...exit net!" shouted Ed.

Shrieks of laughter echoed into the distance as the screen darkened.

"Well—there you have it. I figured staying would just prolong the torture." Ed's voice had become shaky. He swiveled his chair to face the group. "There's more. They did continue after I left, they've er, been kind enough to donate some clips for their cause—their tortures of Eli."

"Nasty," said Helix. "Real nasty."

"Yeah, and it gets worse than that," said Mansutti. "So all we know currently is that there are five or six of them, they're likely to be lugging

him from place to place via that capsule, they eat take-away, and the next time Ed gets an invite to a freak show, they're cactus.”

“Amen,” said Ron.

“Has anyone had a look at the net addresses on any of the recordings?” said Helix.

Ron sat back in his chair shaking his head. “Yep, it’s like ping pong, re-routing every few minutes, must be through hacked sub-nets.”

“Not necessarily,” replied Helix. “Ed—I’m sure you won’t mind me taking those clips.”

“No, take the damn things!” said Ed clicking a button on his control unit, causing the center of the table to open.

Helix reached into the console and removed the clip.

“There’s three more clips in the tray, the burgundy ones,” said Ed waving his hand at the center of the table.

Mansutti looked at Helix and said, “Lix, we want to try for a meeting tonight, see if we can’t get this ordeal finished with—OK with you?”

Helix placed the clips into his trouser pocket. “Sure—” He looked at Ed. “No problem.”

## CHAPTER 7

# VIRTUAL PARIS

Peppi was pleased that, as the day's forecast had predicted, it was a perfect day within the Paris neural-net simulation. She strolled through the park on the way to her favorite café. In the distance she could see a lady crouched down at the lake's edge, feeding the ducks pieces broken from of a loaf of bread. Peppi decided to approach the lady; she really needed to talk.

"Hello—I could almost say it is *really* a lovely day!" said Peppi with a beaming smile.

"Well, yes. It's far better here than the real weather today," replied the lady.

"Oh, is it?" asked Peppi.

"Yes, haven't you been outside today?" asked the lady.

"Er no—no I haven't," replied Peppi.

"Oh, well you only need to glance through a window to see, there's a torrent, its dreadful, so I thought I might relax in the neural-net where the weather is fine, and feed the ducks!" The lady stood up and turned to Peppi. "Can't do any harm every now and then—you're rather young to be in the neural-net unsupervised, is that your real profile?"

"Yes. I'm eleven, but I am supervised—rather, by some very expensive hardware, though I wish I weren't."

"You mean your parents are not monitoring you?"

"That's right."

"And they think just some expensive hardware is enough?"

“No—no I don’t have any parents.”

“Oh. I’m sorry, how intrusive of me!” said the lady. “Here, help me feed the ducks, what is your name?”

“Peppi,” she replied taking a crust from the lady. “And yours?”

“I’m Kate. Do you live locally? I’m from just a few blocks away.”

“I live in Paris,” replied Peppi, clutching her long, black hair back from her face as she threw the last piece of bread into the lake.

“Yes? Near here?” asked the lady.

“I love the water—” Peppi crouched down at the water’s edge and ran her hand across the surface. “I’m a very good swimmer.” She began to stutter as she tried to get the next sentence out, “U...u...un..I’m sorry—”

“No don’t worry, it’s OK if you stutter.”

“I don’t stutter, normally, in the real world. There’s some things I’m just unable to say. You see, it’s the hardware.”

Kate looked stunned. “Oh! That’s some hardware alright—why on Earth does it prevent you from...*talking*?”

Peppi stood and faced the lady. “I suppose if I could tell you, well, then I would, but the stuttering—it prevents that also. Anyway, it was still nice talking to you, I’ve got to see someone now at Cafe de Daumesnil.”

“Oh. OK Peppi,” said the lady, still puzzled.

*Damn Bishop’s hardware!* Peppi thought as she turned and made her way across the embankment returning to the footpath. She stopped for a moment and cast an affectionate smile towards the lady, and they both waved goodbye. The footpath continued alongside the lake as in the real Paris. The park in the virtual Paris however was never as populated as the real park, even on such a beautiful day within the neural-net.

As Peppi strolled, she thought of the man she fondly knew as her Papa, Charles Langford. They would often walk through the park. She hadn’t received a word from him in three days, he would always tell her things to cheer her up when she was down, but now the reason for her gloom was his absence and there wasn’t anyone to comfort her, except perhaps

Gustave. He would surely be busy serving drinks to business associates involved in virtual meetings who ironically would be left sober and empty once jacked-out from the neural-net.

Crossing the road to arrive at the café nestled beneath overhanging vines, her usual table for two was vacant and she sat with the park to her left. The waiter she so desperately needed to speak to was yet to be seen. At one table sat a group of well-dressed businessmen and at another, a man and lady who appeared to be in great spirits, as if they were long lost friends reunited at last—the neural-net’s forte. Occasionally the lady would scream with laughter, covering her mouth and rocking into the back of the chair before leaning forward and saying, ‘Yes, that’s right’ and ‘Oh, he did didn’t he!’ The positive emotions were washing over Peppi and now at least she didn’t feel quite so depressed and lonely.

It was while staring at the couple in a vague daydream state, with random thoughts of Papa flashing through her mind, that she felt a warm hand take hold of her arm. It was Gustave.

“Gus!”

“Bonjour Peppi—and where have you been this week?” said Gustave before taking the seat opposite. Gustave wore a white double-breasted shirt, black slacks and dark slick hair hanging over heavy eye-brows. “Peppi? What’s wrong?” he asked.

“I’m worried—”

“Peppi is worried? What possibly could worry such a bright and beautiful young lady?”

She began to cry. Tears of pure reason trickled down her pale skin. “Papa still hasn’t contacted me, it’s been three days. Not a word, nothing, I fear something has happened to him. He usually contacts me two or three times a day.”

“Don’t worry Peppi, I’m sure he is OK,” said Gustave, removing a handkerchief from his pocket and handing it to Peppi.

Peppi blew her nose. “No!” she sniffled. “He would have contacted

me. You remember what I told you he said to me when we last spoke? You see, he knew something was wrong. He knew!” Peppi continued to cry. “I’m so worried Gus—I’m so lonely.”

“Peppi, I’m here. You know you don’t need to feel so lonely—and what about your friends? Er—Aimee and Gabrielle?”

“My neural-net friends, virtual friends, Papa was real—is real, he wa ar..ar. I can’t tell you what I need to say, you know, becau...be... because—” Peppi continued to stutter, “I...I...” It proved too difficult so she gave up and continued to cry.

“Well, wherever your Papa is—you know I’m still here Thursday and Friday nights. I work in the real Cafe de Daumesnil, so whenever you’re finally allowed, you come in and see me, and I’ll fix you up a real strawberry thick shake just the way you like—OK?”

“OK—one day,” said Peppi with a courageous smile, wiping her tears away.

“Right then,” replied Gustave. He looked at his mini-tab before adding, “OK, I’ll just fix these orders and then I’ll be back.” He stood up and looked down at Peppi and said, “Cheer up Peppi, I’m sure there is a simple explanation as to why Papa hasn’t spoken to you. I’ll get you your usual?”

“No, just a glass of water—thank you.”

This was the first time Peppi had spoken to Gustave in a week, normally it would be at least three times a week, but with her mind numbed by the disappearance of Papa, she opted to wallow alone in her room, reluctant to put a neural-cap on. She was almost certain that she would never see Papa again.

## CHAPTER 8

# PSYCHIC WARFARE

6th November 2105 19:15

It was getting dark by the time Helix was dropped off outside his apartment block.

“Marz, it’s me,” he said as the door unbolted. He trudged slowly into the apartment like a zombie, walked to a lounge chair and slumped into it, exhausted. He closed his eyes for a few seconds.

“Still alive, then?” asked Marlow sitting up on the sofa, strands of hair standing out of place. “How the hell did you get away from those Feds, the System would have been stretched.”

“Get a haircut, Marz,” Helix said calmly then added, “So Demeron was a plug—and I was rescued.”

“Rescued?”

“Yeah, by Mansutti—” Helix sat forward on the chair placing his elbows on each knee and pushing his face into his palms. “And now I owe him one.”

“What? Mansutti? He’s the last person in the Zone anyone wants to owe!” Marlow leaned forward and reached to the floor for his almost empty bottle of Coke. He took two large swigs and finished it. “What is it you owe?”

“A job—” Helix stopped then calmly said, “A job—a body search.”

“What are you talking about? An’ cut the crap.”

“The body search will give it away.”

Seconds passed in silence while Marlow pondered for an answer. “Ahh—you mean that story is true?”

“Yeah, it’s true, it’s the brother of some business associate of his, and it’s going down tonight.”

“Not with Mansutti, Lix!” Marlow snapped adding, “Of course, you got no choice now but—fuck! You get a name in the Zone for puttin’ down a set—you’re history without being part of a set—so what? What if it’s a Zone set doin’ it to this guy?”

“Look, I’m up to my neck in it, that’s fucking obvious. The last thing I had planned to do in the Zone was guide a bunch of Mansutti’s goons to a killing spree. You know me, Marz, killing people doesn’t quite sit right with me.”

“No, no it wouldn’t Lix, but—”

“I mean these guys are nasty material—” Helix sucked a gasp of air in before releasing and saying, “Total scum.”

“Lix, just don’t get to trusting Mansutti OK? I mean, hell. I was a leveler scraping an existence doing some work in one of his clubs. I’ve seen him break skulls with that cane of his, while eating a burger from his other hand. If there’s a buck to be made in someone’s downfall, he’ll waste ‘em when the time suits him—you know what I mean?”

“Yes. Yes, I’m afraid I’ve got the picture there, Marz.”

“And then there’s Kaos from the Plato set, not to mention the whole Plato set, but Kaos alone, a good friend of his—a psycho, capital S!”

“OK, Marz—I’ve got the picture.”

Helix stood and walked over to one of the large glass windows that stretched from the ceiling to the floor and peered out over the Zone. The buildings were silhouetted against a deep orange sky as dusk began to set in. “You know—I’m starting to feel like Charlie. I mean, where is it all going? People getting cut up in the real world. People getting cut up in the neural-net. The elite controlling the masses with a candy tech stick. It makes me sick—and yet I was there, adding the sugar.” Helix

turned from the window. “And yet as individuals we must persevere through the harsh reality of our dog eat dog world.”

“Lix, at the moment it’s just a case of treading far more carefully than we ever have, and making sure we miss the dog shit.”

Helix laughed and said, “Ain’t that the truth. I’d better get ready, I’ve got to be down the Proscenium, Mansutti’s got a room set up.” Bending down, he pulled back a corner of the carpet revealing a steel safe encased in the cement. He pulled a cord with a small scanner attached up to his eye causing the safe to click open. Inside were Helix’s original source code software clips that were more important to him than someone’s life savings. He had copies of some kept in a box, but he only had a master copy with the red volume stored in the safe. He removed the required clip and a replacement tranquilizer for the ZX1, and closed the safe before throwing the clip to Marlow. “Copy that while I have a shower would you, Marz?”

“Sure.”

He walked into the bathroom and took a long look at himself. *What the hell am I doing?* He thought. Business was just starting to cruise along in relative safety, no hiccups. But in the space of one day he was starting to choke. Marlow was right; when it came to Fire Zone matters, he was always right. He had lived in the Zone most of his life, from the gutter up and, after earning Helix’s trust, proved to be just the person Helix needed to survive in the Zone. Thanks to Marlow’s insight, Mansutti’s character had stooped down several levels below the level at which Helix had him currently placed, which was low at the outset.

After a brief shower Helix threw on some clean Zone clothes, absent of style, a black nanocarb lined shirt for protection, black jeans and shoes and matching jacket which had sealed inner compartments for clips. “You wanna come, Marz?” asked Helix, walking into the lounge room.

“Not particularly—nightclubs aren’t my scene at the best of times. And this sure ain’t the best of times.” Marlow stood up with the tranquilizer and slotted it into the ZX1, saying, “Good luck. Just do the job then get clear away from Mansutti.” He handed the weapon to Helix.

The chrome finish of the weapon sparkled under the fluorescent light; Helix never liked having to carry it. He checked the LCD display and placed it into his jacket pocket. Marlow handed him the copy of the code red. One look at Marlow’s face and Helix knew that they shared the same apprehension, and that was all the more unsettling.

It didn’t take long to arrive at The Proscenium, the largest dark seed of LA, a *Gothic* nightclub. The line up was dark, street lights absorbed into the abyss of *deep* people, punks of every description.

‘*Welcome to The Proscenium*’ crackled over the speaker as the shuttle stopped and the doors slid open.

Helix stepped from the vehicle. He looked up at the tower above the club, close to sixty floors of dirt cheap accommodation. Adjoined to its side a quarter way up was a shuttle line trunk feeding off in three directions, with shuttles gliding past like fire flies. The bass thump of the club seemed somehow in sync with the churning of his stomach, his mouth was dry. He began to walk —s the entrance, amid the chatter reflected from hard cement, giggles and rambling, ‘*Back of the line pal!*’

At the entrance, Helix was stopped by an overweight goon.

“Name?”

“Carone. Helix.”

“Second floor, orange bar.”

Helix proceeded towards armor-plated steel doors which automatically opened as he approached. Immediately the sound hit him. A hologram of a tiny angel flew towards his face and kissed his cheek. It then glided down to the center of his chest, turning into a heart which was split by an arrow that came in from two o’clock. Helix realized he hadn’t been

checked for weapons.

The music was loud, electronic and hard. Holograms danced with mortals, iconic figures of the past millennia. He carefully negotiated his way past several members of the walking dead, arriving at the corner of the center dance floor. He peered up at the second level to see which side the orange bar was on. It was barely visible through the holograms of clientele gliding around the center arena.

Helix was stopped. Two girls, their foreheads plastered with psychstim microform stepped in front of him. One of them, whose spiked hair could be classed as a dangerous weapon, grabbed his jacket. Helix pulled back, removing the hand, only to receive a scream of laughter. He then pushed past and made his way to the steps.

On the second level Helix looked over at the orange bar. It was an amp bar; drinks laced with pleasure for those where stims and alcohol no longer rendered the required fix. There was a door at the far side guarded by two large men. Helix approached the door.

“I’m here to see Mansutti,” he said.

Helix felt a hand on his shoulder. It was Mansutti.

“Helix, nice and punctual—this way.”

The security opened the door revealing a blue passage way and Helix followed Mansutti along it, up a flight of stairs and into a massive room. To the left, behind a long black desk with chromed edges, was one of the largest screens Helix had ever seen. The screen extended from ceiling to floor and ran beyond the length of the desk as it displayed pulsing images from inside the night club. To the right, on the opposite side of the room, stood a small private bar and preceding that a set of lounge chairs.

Ed was sitting with a cognac in his left hand. “Ah, my boy!” he said attempting to get up to greet Helix.

“No need to get up,” said Helix walking over and shaking his hand.

“Take a seat Lix, you wanna drink?” asked Mansutti.

“A glass of water will be fine,” he replied before taking a seat on an adjacent chair, ninety degrees to Ed. The room was dimly lit and flickered continuously from the screen.

“Fifteen minutes till you blokes go on-net—so how ya feeling, Lix?” said Mansutti, peering over from the bar with his rat-like grin.

“My only real concern is confidentiality. I’ve managed to keep enemies to a minimum in the Zone, if word gets out I’m the jack for this op, well—”

Mansutti tutted, shaking his head as he walked back and handed Helix a glass of water. “Helix—you have my word, only Jared and Ron know you’re the jack—and believe me, they know the importance of keeping things quiet.”

Mansutti took a seat opposite Helix. “Lix, something’s been chewing around in my head today, about you, and Bioscope—” He swung his glass of cognac in the air. “That’s one company nobody fucks with. And you seem, well, you are kiddo, an intelligent young man. You don’t seem like you would be involved with terrorists—so why they after you?”

Helix was surprised he hadn’t asked earlier. “Well—maybe I left with some code they would rather keep in their vaults.”

Mansutti grinned. “But this Alpha Two business?”

Helix shook his head. “No idea. Wasn’t me. Nothing to do with me.” He took a swig of water. “So you and your contact gonna keep me informed the next time they try a sting?”

“Sure Lix, as I said, can’t have a cherry with your cred leave the Zone now can I?” said Mansutti before looking over to Ed. “Ed, stop worrying. Jared and Ron are my sharp shooters, this’ll be a cinch for them.”

The old man looked nervous. “I hope so, Derek. There’s a lot at stake.”

Helix felt he should say something to put Ed’s worries at bay, but could think of nothing. What did he know? Five or six people

guaranteed to get locked down in the neural-net, but what if—and most likely they would—what if they had someone outside the neural-net, what’s gonna stop him from taking a cheap shot?

Mansutti looked at Helix menacingly, as if there was still some explaining to do.

Helix decided to avoid the issue. “Well, I think it’s time we kitted up.”

“Sure.” Mansutti stood and walked over to the table. “Over here gentlemen, take a seat.”

Ed followed Helix to the desk.

“Can we get that damned screen turned off!” snapped Ed.

Mansutti followed up on Ed’s request.

“Damn thing was starting to give me a headache.”

Helix and Ed each took an executive chair at opposing ends of the desk. Mansutti sat in the middle facing the screen, and placed the control unit on the desk in front of him before pressing an appropriate button causing the center of the desk to taper open, revealing the console deck.

“You’ve got your profile clip, Ed?” asked Helix.

Mansutti replied for him, “It’s already plugged in.”

“Plug these in,” said Helix, sliding two clips to the center of the desk.

“Two Lix? Is that all?” said Mansutti sarcastically. He slotted the two clips piggyback into the console. “Now to get the boys online.”

The screen was divided up into segments with the top left displaying Jared and someone else, someone with a mandelbrot tattooed across his cheeks and forehead. They were in a shuttle.

“You guys all ready?” asked Mansutti.

Ron was wearing the camera attached to the side of his head and brought a weapon into view. “Yeah, Des—we’re ready.”

Jared sat motionless staring into the camera.

“Who’s the other guy?” asked Helix.

Mansutti pressed the control unit and the word *mute* appeared on the screen before saying, “That’s our Mr Kaos, Helix, didn’t want to be left out of a carving session.”

Helix sank a little in his chair. “Nice.”

“OK, Lix, down to you. There’s a neural-cap under the desk.”

“I’ve brought my own.” Helix reached into his jacket and pulled out his neural-cap.

Ed and Helix placed the caps upon their heads and secured the velcro.

“OK, five minutes, gents.” Mansutti held a button on the control unit. “No one’s to disturb us, you got that, Gav?”

“No problem boss,” came the reply.

Helix felt his mouth start to dry and took a swig of water. A thought crossed his mind, about the future, the possibilities he could face in similar situations. Submerged within this subterranean reality, nobody had the knowledge that he possessed. In the neural-net he was God.

“I’ll follow both of you. How you gonna tell me the address of the SLAM?” asked Mansutti.

“I’ll say it and I’ll screen dump it—I’ll jack out and repeat it if necessary,” replied Helix, his heart was starting to race.

“OK, kids—Ed, you ready?”

“Let’s get this over with,” Ed replied.

Helix flicked a switch on the side of the cap. Ed followed. Both of their heads slumped back as they fell under the trance of the neural-net. On the screen Mansutti watched Ed select the necessary options from the default net waitress. Helix was in a pure white room facing a bookcase. Mansutti watched Helix briefly before his segment darkened, the bottom corner lit up with the words, *‘ED-01—tracking profile.’*

Ed had reached his destination—the front of an old hangar. In the distance he could see the capsule lit by moonlight that shone through a crack in the roof of the giant structure.

“Ed? That you?” called Elias, struggling to turn his head in the capsule.

“Yes, hang in there, Eli, you’re still in the net,” said Ed as he walked towards his brother. The footsteps echoed off of four walls. He arrived at the capsule, and crouched down beside his brother, “Just hang tight,

Eli, this'll all be over soon."

"How much they asking for Ed? Don't give 'em a dime!"

Ed looked along the capsule for the catches but they were fastened hard. Footsteps could be heard, then out of the darkness walked four demons. Each of them had a set of stunted horns and eyes glowing red, their skin reptilian. One of the group ran over to the capsule and threw Ed to one side before falling to his knees and repeatedly head-butted the capsule, causing it to fracture. The rest of the group started laughing in a sick cackle.

"Getting there—" came Helix's voice to Mansutti.

"C'mon, Lix," muttered Mansutti.

"Got all four," said Helix.

One of the demons started yelling. "I can't move! I'm stuck!" As Ed looked over he could see the first of the group affected by Helix's red code, his body frozen in suspended animation from the neck down. There was another scream as the head-butter threw his head back after what appeared to be a steel blade had protracted from the capsule and pierced his skull. "Ahh! Fuck!" he screamed and was left wriggling on the floor as if an electrical charge had punctured his third eye.

"What the hell is going on?" shouted one of the demons. "Hashman! You there? I can't move! Jack us out! Jack us out! What? Wa—you mean you can't?"

"Jesus," muttered Mansutti.

Helix's screen segment morphed to the warehouse location.

Mansutti watched Ed's view to see Helix appear as one of the demons.

"Who the hell are you?" asked one of the demons, his head alone moving above a frozen body.

"You people really are scum," said Helix strolling in front of the three that stood in suspended animation.

Mansutti watched as Helix's screen segment was overlaid with the SLAM address.

"You got that?" Helix asked Mansutti.

Mansutti took a screen dump and patched it downline to Ron and Jared. “Yeah, we got it—the engineer’s gonna pinpoint their location now.”

It didn’t take long. “We’re on our way, Des, about three minutes,” said Ron.

“Hashman! For Christ’s sake! Get us out!”

Ed stood up and walked towards one of the demons saying, “Getting a taste of your own medicine now—very bitter, isn’t it.”

“Eli, I’m gonna jack you out soon,” said Helix adding, “But I think it best you stay in the neural-net until the carnage is over.”

“Yes—yeah OK,” he replied.

“Not long now, Eli,” said Ed.

“Who are you?” asked one of the demons to Helix.

Helix raised his arms to inspect his new skin. “Well, right now, looking like one of you, I’m sure not the fairy godmother.”

“You freaks are history,” said Ed.

The demon laying on the floor started calling for backup, “Come on hashman, fry this guy.”

“Your hashman—he’s trying his best, got some code on him I’ll give him that. Unfortunately for you, I’m one step ahead of the game—shouldn’t have said that, looks like he’s giving up. He could rip the caps from your heads, but you know, odds are your brain cells will be fried.”

“Hashman! Hashman!”

“You freaks are about to meet justice,” said Ed.

“Sit tight Eli, I’ll clear the capsule,” said Helix.

The capsule vaporised, leaving Elias suspended two inches above the ground. His body then swiveled upright until he was standing—free within hyper reality.

Elias turned to the demon still laying on the floor. “Is it OK to give this one a kick?”

“Sure,” replied Helix adding, “I’ve switched their profile code,

they've got no security now."

Elias dealt a blow to the stomach and the demon curled up winded, a code red simulation.

"C'mon hashman!" called one of the standing demons.

"Too late," said Helix.

And it was. Two of the demons disappeared abruptly to the horror of the others. "Fuck!" screamed another before he, too, disappeared. The one on the floor looked up at Helix and said, "You beat hashman. I know who you are." And then he disappeared.

"I guess that means they're terminated," said Helix. "I'm jacking you out now Eli."

"OK," said Elias, before he too disappeared from the scene.

Helix gradually opened his eyes. Across at the other side of the desk he could see Ed rubbing his.

"Well, gentleman, the job's a resounding success. Look, Ed," said Mansutti pointing at the screen.

On the screen, a pair of blood-splattered hands reached out in front and unclipped the capsule.

"Eli! Is Eli OK?" cried Ed hysterically.

"Ed, Eli's fine. For Christ's sake, Ron get a shot of Elias."

The screen view swung to the top end of the capsule that appeared to be placed on top of a long coffee table. As it opened, Elias climbed out with the help of the cameraman.

"Say hello to your brother. He's watching," said Ron.

"Oh—er—about time, Ed." Elias was visibly shaken and barely managed to quiver a smile as he placed his feet on the floor. "My God, look at this mess."

Dead bodies flashed across the screen, bits of skull and other tissue mixed with pieces of circuit board, the room, speckled red.

"Who were they?" Mansutti asked.

"Dunno—" said Jared adding, "Kaos made a mess, we better get outta

here, we're outside the Zone. My God, Kaos! You are sick!"

Mansutti promptly switched the screen off. "Great job Lix, how'd you do that?"

Helix swiveled in his chair to face Mansutti and after taking a swig of water said, "It's all to do with the time. With each tick of the scene I had tenfold, I knew hashman's every next move. You never saw what I did, and nor did he."

"Well Helix, I am greatly indebted," said Ed throwing a cash clip across the table to Helix. "A reward for your trouble."

## CHAPTER 9

# BLOODBATH IN LOOFERAC

7th November 2105 01:15

The sound of the alarm needed much improvement if one was to sleep through it, but then that would defeat its purpose. Darcy reached over to his watch and muted the annoying beeps. Holographic text projected three inches from its face, a message from Stella that read: *Bloodbath—location: Looferac—five dead. Zone gang involvement.* He held the watch staring at it disdainfully, as if somehow *it* was responsible for his call to duty, before throwing it down onto the sheet beside him. It took a few moments, watching the repetitive color change of advertising projected onto clouds far beyond the window before he finally made a move. *Five dead in Looferac? Likely to be totally unrelated to Carone.*

The idea that he was now to be summoned by Parisian powers whenever the Zone let off more than a flare reminded him of times spent in Ghana. There at least he was paid for his extra services. The work was now a far cry from his earlier years as a mercenary working the African power vacuums for a security firm based in Johannesburg. Fighting alongside a multinational insurgence group of mercenaries, the fighting was ruthless and dirty and although lucrative, it was mere chicken feed compared to his personal payroll from Bishop.

He started his official combat life as a US Green Beret. His resume asked for action, he could speak several languages, was specialised in intelligence gathering and psychological operations as well as being

deadly with his fists, skills that of late had become next to redundant.

Reluctantly, Darcy threw on his black slacks, a white casual shirt and black sports-jacket which all had been carefully placed over a chair, then his shoes, watch and packed his ZX2 before making an exit for the hotel lobby. A cigarette was in order, but hotel law restricted him from lighting it, at least until the Darcy law kicked in which was about twelve feet from the exit.

After climbing into the first available taxi shuttle, Darcy swiped his PID card and was promptly requested for a destination address.

“Looferac.”

The shuttle elevated from within the hotel and onto the complex shuttle line.

*“That’s Looferac, please indicate street location.”*

Darcy summoned the relevant information from his watch and gave the location to the on-board computer.

The shuttle left the Chelsea complex. The line snaked a path among many, some adjoined to buildings and other megaplexes, exit lines tapering away into skyscrapers and housing complexes.

*‘Five minutes to destination,’* was barely visible on the small, vandalised screen of the shuttle. The floor was a mishmash of discarded gum and cigarette burns. The taxi veered down an exit ramp leaving the magnetic repulsion of the line and slipped seamlessly upon a four wheeled transport chassis for the rest of the journey along the streets. It was a grim neighborhood on the outskirts of the Fire Zone. *Jesus, look at this shit-hole. These apartment blocks should have been demolished a century ago.*

The shuttle fronted a block of apartments that had projected shadows from curious residents that were lit up by police floodlights. After climbing from the shuttle, Darcy pushed through the crowd to where two armed officers had the entrance to the stairwell guarded.

“Stella.”

“Let’s have some ID,” said one of the officers pointing a scanner at

Darcy's eyes.

The policeman checked his watch before stepping aside to let Darcy through. "Third floor."

A mosaic of bloody black footprints led through the entrance foyer. Darcy took the elevator up to level three, the soles of his shoes clicking from the sticky blood underfoot. He walked into the lobby of the third floor.

"Ah, you're the Stella agent," said a sergeant standing at the doorway to an apartment before checking his watch. "Darcy, too bad about yesterday. Come on in."

"Yeah—too bad," replied Darcy as he followed the sergeant. "So what's the story?"

"Four guys, brains shot to pieces. Appears they were in the neural-net. Then this guy, looks like he was making a run for it."

"Holy mother!" said Darcy looking down at a severed head laying upon the chest of its former owner. The runner had a steel shaft impaled through his skull pinning it to the torso—a calling card. Darcy crouched down beside the head and held his watch, facing the shaft's insignia and took a picture.

"The Plato set," said the officer shaking his head and rubbing a grey stubble. "Another up and coming Zone gang."

Stepping further into the room, Darcy carefully balanced himself stepping on unbloodied patches of carpet. In the center of the room, a long capsule rested atop a small table. On the nearside, two bodies unrecognisable, heads blown half off and on the far side two more bodies with their heads resting together, still wearing neural-caps.

"Two birds with one bullet," said the officer.

Darcy tutted and shook his head saying, "Somebody pushed their heads together—easy." He cupped his hand over his nose. *This place smells worse than a fucking abattoir*, Darcy thought as he stood beside the table and surveyed the entire room. He then looked down at the capsule and opened it. "Well, well—moulded for a grown man, a neck-

hole and two strong handles for lugging.” Darcy reached below the table and pulled out a large piece of cloth. “And a sock to cover it.”

“Weirdest shit I’ve ever seen. What the hell’s all that about?” asked the officer.

Darcy closed the capsule before replying. “Extortion—scare the hell out of the captive in front of loved ones via cyberspace, sells their cause. There was a similar case in Brussels. Is there a net recording?”

“Sure is. Here’s a copy for your techs to have a look at,” said the sergeant, handing it to Darcy.

He placed the plastic clip inside his jacket before looking around and asking, “Is there an intact neural-cap?”

“Ah, yeah,” said the sergeant before shouting, “O’Halloran!”

A young officer came through from one of the other rooms, face as white as chalk. “Sir?”

“You got the details of that cap?”

“Yes.”

“OK, give it to this gentleman.”

“Sir,” said the policeman who stumbled a little as he stepped awkwardly towards Darcy and handed him the cap.

Darcy briefly studied the neural-cap then leaned over one of the bodies on the couch and took a close look at the one being worn by one of the victims. They were identical. “OK, I’ll send these off to our techs, see what they think. If anything turns up, let me know.”

“Yes, and of course, likewise,” replied the officer.

As he left the apartment he said loudly, “Somebody’s caused the homicide of five people. A jack with some expertise.” *But was it you Carone?* he thought as he headed for the elevator.

After returning to the hotel room, Darcy slotted the clip into the console at the base of the screen then walked back to the bed and made himself comfortable against the headboard. The display was quite dark, but in the distance Darcy could just make out the capsule, lit only by

moonlight that shone through a gap in the roof of a very large structure.

*'There he is,'* was muttered from the left of the recorded individual.

An old man with white hair could now be seen walking towards the capsule, occasionally disappearing from the shafts of moonlight that shone through the cracks overhead. He arrived at the capsule and crouched down beside it, his hair glistening. The pair were talking but inaudibly.

Darcy continued to watch as the extortionists who appeared as demons, approached the capsule. One of them ran out in front and threw the old man aside before repeatedly head-butting the capsule to the amusement of the group. 'I can't move! I'm stuck!'

The screen swiveled down to show the feet of the recorded individual, his body appeared to be frozen. Then the headbutter started screaming and wriggling on the floor. An extra demon appeared from the ether and paced in front of the group and said something, but it was scrambled. The screen then turned blue like an antique PC system and flashed with the words *'Fatal deception error'*

*Could it be?*

"Very few could pull that off—" Darcy muttered. "Only one way to be sure." He directed the clip for upload to Stella.

## CHAPTER 10

# PARIS – THE BASEMENT

The basement was more than just home for Peppi, now it was her entire world. A large pool, a gym and enclosed garden area, coupled with neural-net access, meant Peppi could somehow remain relatively sane.

Bishop walked along the side of the pool, stopping at a dark blob in the corner. The mass of hair shrunk in towards the center as Peppi pushed herself from the bottom of the pool, her pale face breaking the surface. She looked up at Bishop, hoping for some news of her Papa but poised to re-submerge should Bishop start ranting about her reluctance to eat.

“Peppi, come out of the pool, dear,” said Bishop adding, “I have some news of Papa.”

Peppi’s hands came to the surface and reached onto the side of the pool at Bishop’s feet, but she remained in the pool peering up at him. “What? What’s happened to him?” she asked quietly, expecting the worst.

“Come out of the pool, Peppi!” replied Bishop loudly.

“No! Tell me what has happened!” she demanded.

Bishop sighed clasping his plump hands in front of the bulge of his belly. “Mr Langford is dead, Peppi.”

Peppi screamed, “No!” Immediately her eyes began to crescent and fill with tears. She threw herself backwards through the water, bringing one hand to her face and fanning her legs before reaching the other side of the pool and turning to grasp the side. She pushed her face against her forearm and began to sob.

“He died in a shuttle accident, a few days ago. I’ve only just found out.”

She knew he was lying again. It sickened her even more that this evil man actually thought she would fall for such a ridiculous lie. Peppi had made her mind up many years ago that Bishop could not be trusted. “Liar! How long have you known?” she snapped, adding, “I watched the news, so you’ve been filtering my access just to fit in with your schedule! You couldn’t tell me until now!”

Peppi listened for Bishop’s footsteps as she sobbed, she was shaking but not from the cold. She heard his footsteps getting close and so pushed herself from the side and returned to the bottom of the pool. There she remained, watching the large shimmering Bishop as he stopped at her original position. Crying underwater, her eyes began to get sore but she couldn’t stop, the emptiness of her world had taken a dive for the worse. She managed to stop shaking long enough to peer up at Bishop as he paced along the pool side. Once he was gone she returned to the surface, her energy sapped, she was barely able to cling to the edge.

She remained there, crying at the pool side for almost a quarter of an hour, occasionally swapping arms on which to rest her head. Eventually she eased herself out of the pool and lay shivering on its edge, watching trickles of water run from the tips of her fingers onto the tiles in a trance.

Peppi wasn’t sure if her continued shivering was from the shock or from being cold, but on noticing goose bumps across her forearm, decided on the latter. She stumbled to her feet and walked across the tiles and into her bedroom, slumping onto the bed where she continued to cry. Her eyes were now puffed and sore and her nose was beginning to run, causing her to sniffle.

She rolled over on the bed reaching for her box of tissues, when she noticed something unusual on the screen. The live image was, as usual, a camera shot of her favorite entry point to the neural-net park—Bois

de Vincennes looking down over a bench shaded by an oak tree, and in the distance the lake she frequently visited. The strange thing was that in the lower-right corner of the screen, below the names Gabby and Aimee, was a new name that Peppi didn't know, *Snoopy*.

“Snoopy? How did you get there?” she sniffled and slowly eased forward, not taking her eyes off of the name. “I never gave friend rights to a Snoopy.” Peppi pulled a tissue from the box and proceeded to blow her nose, mesmerized by the new contact. The security settings in place on her console should have blocked access to an unidentified net user, so what was she to make of this? She took a neural-cap from a small bed-side table and slid herself backwards, resting on the headboard. She was by no means in the frame of mind to enter the neural-net, and grasped the neural-cap tight on her lap. She stared vacantly at the intruder's name, reluctant to place the cap on her head. In the distance neural tourists meandered along the lake's edge. Nothing looked out of place, nothing apart from the name that blinked within her *friends* list, *Snoopy*, and he, she, or it, was online!

Peppi gradually lifted the neural-cap and placed it upon her head. She flicked a switch on its side and the bedroom dissolved around her being replaced by the oak tree and the park bench. She was startled to see a man sitting on the bench! He was a large man, dressed in nineteenth century attire complete with a top hat and tails, sat rigid and grasping a walking cane. The man turned his head towards Peppi, and smiled at her.

“Ah! How'd you—” questioned Peppi, but was cut short.

“Hide my appearance from your live eye?” questioned the man.

“You're Snoopy?” she asked.

“Yes, or at least Snoopy is my neural-net alias—appearing in your bedroom,” replied the man pointing his cane into the general direction of the virtual camera.

“How did you know about my live eye? And how did you add yourself to my *friends* list?”

“I know many things about you and your little setup, young Peppi!” The man paused and looked beyond Peppi. “Turn around and look towards the lake.”

Peppi turned and was even more startled to see the back of herself fifteen metres away and walking towards the lake. “Is that—”

“Yes—it is you. A pretend Peppi, as it were. In the real neural-net, the neural-net that Bishop and his hardware can see. While you’re with me there will be a copy of you being controlled by, dare I say it, an Artificial Intelligence.” The man made a small sarcastic cough and said, “Enough intelligence to fool any eavesdroppers I can assure you!”

“I can breathe underwater!” Peppi said.

“Yes, you certainly can,” replied the man.

“No stuttering!”

“No stuttering,” replied the man adding, “So where would you like to go?”

“Oh, well,” Peppi paused in confusion then asked, “Who are you?”

“I’m your friend, but exactly *who* I am must remain a secret until the right time, but for now call me Snoopy.”

“The right time? Are you a friend of Papa’s?”

“Yes,” replied the man.

“Well, you know he is dead, then?” Peppi asked walking towards the bench and taking a seat beside him. She felt dwarfed by his size.

The man breathed in and sighed. “Yes, I know he is dead.”

“A shuttle accident?”

“That’s right.”

Peppi quietly asked, “When? When did he die?”

The man hesitated before answering, “Four days ago.”

Peppi leaned forward on the bench, swaying her hands across the grass at her feet, her face squashed down between her legs, and stared directly at the ground. “An accident?” she mumbled.

“Yes, his shuttle crashed.”

“I think he knew he was going to die. Was it because of me?”

“No, of course not.”

She sat up. “Shuttles don’t crash! Papa and Bishop had been arguing a lot lately, I think because of me.”

There was a brief silence before the man said, “Your Papa has made something special for you, to say goodbye. Are you ready to go?”

“Oh? Yes,” replied Peppi.

Immediately their surroundings changed, the bench now facing a familiar three story house. Peppi remembered it. It was Chateau Gateaux, well, that’s what Peppi called it, Papa’s residence in Paris where she had spent some time growing up as a young child.

“Come on,” said the man standing up.

Snoopy led the way to a wrought iron gate and opened it for Peppi to walk through.

“I remember playing in this garden, being watched by those gargoyles,” said Peppi before turning and asking, “Is this how the garden really looks now?”

“Yes,” replied the man.

“It has grown. Overgrown I should say.”

The man calling himself Snoopy stopped at the gate and said, “Peppi, this farewell your Papa has prepared, I don’t want you to be startled. It’s a profile of himself generated by an Artificial Intelligence hooked into the neural-net called Androcies. He will appear as real as in life, the construct intelligence behind Androcies was generated directly from Mr Langford’s, that is, your Papa’s neural scans.”

“So *he* will be *real*?” asked Peppi.

“No! Not real, but—well, as close as technology will permit. You will not be able to interact with your Papa’s profile after today, he wanted it that way.”

Peppi turned and slowly progressed along a narrow footpath. She peered up at the large house before arriving at the front door which started to open. As the door opened it revealed the old man, a perfect profile. It was Papa, as perfect a profile as in reality, even down to his

smell of tobacco. He peered down at Peppi with his reassuring blue eyes, slightly pink around the edges and squinting as if to better study his subject.

“My dear Peppi,” said Langford gesturing with open arms. “Come, come and give your Papa a hug.”

Peppi immediately stepped into the doorway and embraced the old man—burying her head into his woollen cardigan, she began to sob. Langford started stroking Peppi’s head to comfort her.

“Ssh. Now, now, come on Peppi,” he said as the pair swayed to and fro. “Things aren’t going to be so bad without me.”

“You’re gone forever.”

“Well. That is so, but I know some special people. People that are going to make your life as free as mine has been. You’ve already met Snoopy, soon you’ll have more friends to help you make sense of your world.”

“Who is he?”

Langford pulled away from Peppi to look her in the eyes and said, “Snoopy? Well from now on Snoopy is your big brother—OK?”

Peppi smiled.

“That’s better, Peppi!” said the old man. “Now come on in, you remember playing here, don’t you? Sliding up and down the floorboards in your socks?”

“Yes I do,” replied Peppi, adding, “and you told me off when I broke a vase.”

“That’s right, an antique. Well, you can break what you like now,” chuckled Langford.

Snoopy followed Peppi into a large hallway and the pair followed Langford into an adjoining lounge room where a large open fire cast dancing shadows across polished floor boards.

“It’s just how I remember,” remarked Peppi as she progressed into the room.

She walked up to the mantle piece and inspected ornaments that

rekindled distant memories. It had been almost five years, but the smells and her observations took her back to happier times. Turning, Peppi pointed at a green pixie sitting upright on the lounge chair. “Dinkle! He shouldn’t be here! He’s tucked away with all my other soft toys.”

“Oh, I wasn’t sure what had happened to Dinkle, so I decided to include him in the scene,” said Langford.

Peppi picked up the small toy and held it against her cheek. The little green pixie had been her closest companion during some of her lonelier years, but had been banished to a cardboard box with all the other useless toys.

“Poor Dinkle, I’ll have to let you back out when I return to the basement.”

Langford took a seat and gestured to Peppi to sit beside him. “Come, we must talk.”

Peppi sat beside the old man as Snoopy took a seat in one of the adjacent lounge chairs.

The old man’s face had become weary with age as if something monstrous had been troubling him during his final years. The fire crackled and hissed as sap oozed from a log made of zeros and ones. Langford took hold of Peppi’s hands.

“This, all this, is about you, your future.”

Langford’s profile was perfect as if he still swam with mortals, his sunken blue eyes glazed in the fire light. He peered down at the subject of his worries as Peppi nodded in anticipation.

“Peppi, you are more intelligent and mature than anyone I have ever met of your age. It’s not just the education you have been given making you so. It is you. I have now burdened you with my untimely departure and so I want you to understand a few things. Things about people and their modes. One thing you’ll come to realize as you grow old, is that people have modes. Of course, they have moods, but they’re swift like the wind. No, modes are really what shape the planet. People’s modes. Modes are more akin to weather patterns, and when you’re in a mode,

when something grips you like a storm or perhaps a tsunami, it can control you, and, if you rest, you will get smashed into the rocks. If however, you take a pinch of your own knowledge and put that to work upon the tsunami, well, you can expel a certain amount of authority over your own destiny, and just maybe you'll manage to stay afloat and land on more fertile ground. Now, of late I have been riding a tsunami of sorts, but then, I created that tsunami. I'm sorry to have to talk in parables to you Peppi, but in this day and age, simple facts can be prised, right from your mind, so I will be rather vague about things for the time being. This will all make simple sense to you in the not so distant future, so bear with me sweetheart. I know how lost and lonely you are feeling right now, and this profile of me, well, it will be switched off permanently after this meeting."

"Not permanently, I'll miss you!" cried Peppi.

The old man blinked and nodded. "I know, sweetheart. Between moments of what can only be described as insane cold handedness from Bishop, I'm the only flesh you've had to make sense of your world. But look. Right there sits an individual who, like you, has a will to guide his own destiny. Once a corporate slave, but now he too wants freedom, free thought." Langford gazed into the fire and added, "Life—" He looked back at Peppi and then at Snoopy saying, "He's almost free."

"Almost?" asked Peppi.

"Well, like you, almost," said Langford quietly adding, "Very few people on this dear planet are truly free, Peppi. We all have responsibilities, but the freedom to choose the type of responsibilities is true freedom, as we know it."

"But I'm scared of freedom—what if, what if they find out?"

"They? The mass media? The paparazzi parasites? No, you will simply merge into society without raising so much as an eyebrow, and that is exactly what I've been saying to Bishop all along. You know the consequences of letting out your secret. You're old enough and mature enough to face the real world." Langford began to raise his

voice. “Blasted Bishop! Too selfish to see it any other way. So I had to make steps, and quite drastic steps they were—”

“So what now?” asked Peppi.

“What now? Now you can spend as much time as you like in complete freedom.” Langford paused before adding, “For the moment only within the neural-net, with no restrictions however, where you and your adopted big brother over there, Snoopy, can get better acquainted.”

Peppi looked over at the monolith that was her big brother.

“You’re very quiet,” she said.

“For the moment, Peppi. This is time for you and your Papa’s profile, Androcies to hopefully, help you make some sense of your new world, absent of Mr Langford.”

Peppi looked back at her Papa, “Androcies?”

“That’s all I am Peppi, an Artificial Intelligence called Androcies,” replied Langford.

“But—but you’re in the neural-net. Isn’t that illegal?”

“Yes—yes that it is, I’m not even supposed to exist here,” grinned Langford. “So now has come the time. It’s time for me to leave and let you and Snoopy get to know each other.”

Peppi looked into the watery eyes of the old man.

“Come on, Peppi,” said Snoopy who was now standing with an outstretched hand.

Peppi took the hand and stood up, gradually letting go of her Papa with her other hand. As the pair made their way to the lobby, Peppi turned for one last look at Langford, but he had already disappeared.

## CHAPTER 11

# CHELSEA COMPLEX LA

7th November 2105 09:15

The sun cast a shadow over an adjoining park to the Chelsea Complex. In the far distance people the size of ants could be seen walking or jogging prior to a day's work. Six shuttle lines on three levels tapered from a central exit point to the massive complex and shuttles picked up speed, joining the main trunk line running across the park. Darcy sat at a garden setting on the balcony of the apartment leased to one of several hotels within the complex. The structure, as with all megaplexes, contained a myriad of shops within, and on the outermost shell, apartments, hotels and open air terraces of restaurants and cafes. Built in the shape of an elongated pyramid, but flattened on top, with a hundred metre wide skylight providing direct sunlight to twelve floors of assorted shops and venues within, the Chelsea Complex was one of many in the new century replacing the discarded LA.

Looking at the Chelsea Gazette, Darcy reflected upon how easy it had been to take out an executive of the world's leading biotech company. The headline read '*Foul play suspected in Bioscope death!*' It was an easy sting to pull on someone with a seemingly complete disregard for security precautions. A simple switch of two cards in the personal shuttle's guidance and backup systems, allowed the shuttle to be remotely driven at high speed into a steel girder. Clean and simple. No guns, no explosives, no poisons—just electronics. Bishop had wanted

it that way. The investigators were left with nothing but a crumpled bloodied wreckage, and a note barely legible scribbled onto Langford's tablet: *'MUST run patch on Androcies'* Darcy was still at a loss as to what this actually meant.

Not everything had gone the way Bishop had intended. The article also expressed the further misfortunes of Bioscope. The remaining four androids on Lunar One were shut down pending further investigation, Bioscope's contract on the project suspended and massive fines imposed by the hour. The share price had plummeted in light of international resistance to have any near future implementation of autonomous AI activity, an area in which Bioscope had invested so much time and money.

The droid had to be caught and fast. Some initial results had just been fed back from the Bioscope engineers. The neural-cap from the earlier massacre had no branding, back-yard built, but of surprising quality. Although hardware fused, the cap in this case had one fatal flaw in that the repeater could easily be controlled independently of the console, allowing a would be perpetrator to dummy the signal being sent back to the console and vice-versa.

Darcy wasn't particularly interested in the results of the neural-cap tests, although it did show evidence of a jack with some degree of knowledge, not your typical Zone fodder, indications that pointed to Carone. Of particular interest was information from Stella that the Plato set were linked with a major underworld character, a shark by the name of Derek Mansutti, owner of several prominent entertainment venues within the Zone and known to sit on both sides of the Zone fence.

He couldn't understand why Carone would get involved with such a character, but was almost certain he was. Now was as good a time as any to find out, after all Derek Mansutti was only a phone call and a short distance away. Darcy stared into the distance at the skyscrapers of the LA Fire Zone, dark shimmering and irradiated.

Darcy flipped open the small minicon and tapped in directions until

the contact for the Proscenium nightclub came up and hit connect. Immediately there was an answer.

“Proscenium, Underwood,” came from the speaker. The small screen on the minicon was now somehow slightly decayed with the gruff appearance of a Zone employee, sitting behind a desk that was strangely covered in paper clips.

“This is Darcy Jones, I’m after Mr Mansutti.”

“Er, Mr Mansutti is not available.”

“I have a business proposition for him. Let him know. He will be pleased with my substantial offer.”

“Wait a moment,” Underwood replied as the screen switched to advertisements promoting the club. Darcy lit a cigarette.

“Mansutti.”

“Mr Mansutti, I’ll be to the point. This is Stella agent Darcy Jones. It’s my understanding that you have been in contact with Helix Carone.”

“Your understanding?” replied Mansutti as he strolled around a large black desk and took a seat in front of a screen that seemed to completely cover the rear wall.

Not waiting for a further response, Darcy proceeded, “My employer is willing to make you a substantial offer for your assistance in Carone’s apprehension.”

“Well so far, I’ve never heard of him. Just how substantial?”

“Three hundred thousand.”

There was a pause before a small chuckle, which turned into a phlegm induced smoker’s cough that took almost a full minute to clear.

“You have good sources. I can be bought, but a tri-scar for the apprehension of the smartest cherry in the Zone. You understand that this particular cherry, under my wing, could possibly pull that on a monthly basis. Carone has got the technical wizardry that er, I could find extremely useful.” Mansutti grinned.

“You don’t know Carone, Mr Mansutti. He’s not happy with superiority. He’s got attitude with the establishment, and you’re a representation of

one establishment he resents bitterly.”

“Is that so?”

“He loathes anyone wielding power, corrupt or honest—as much as multi-national corporate monopolisation. He’s a loner. Power to the individual is his catch-cry. He’s of a dying breed, his time is up.”

Mansutti held up his hands showing seven fingers. “That said—I want no less than seven digits, that’s for Carone delivered right here.”

The offer didn’t take much to think about, Darcy knew Bishop would close on the deal, to capture Alpha Two and prove to the world that it was sabotage, Bishop would pay a lot more. “Agreed. Obviously, I wouldn’t get ten paces with him apprehended in the Zone, and I don’t want to, if you can provide a neural-net interface I’ll have him scanned and analyzed by Thoth our neural analysis AI. If you can render him unconscious with some semdex, myself and Thoth will take over. He’s not to be aware of us having scanned him.”

“Of course, and if he is involved with your escapee you’ll want to let him go. Let him lead you to this elusive Alpha Two.”

“I’ll need a hyper-link back to Thoth, I’m sure that won’t be a problem.”

“My office Mr Jones,” said Mansutti raising both hands and gesturing towards the screen behind him, “is state of the art. Now when will the payment be made?”

“After the neural analysis is complete you will receive your payment.”

“OK. We have a deal. I’ll contact you when I have Helix—oh, and his business partner Marlow, probably sometime this evening. Send me your contact number.”

Darcy leaned forward and hit the appropriate button on the minicon before saying, “Mr Mansutti—I’m sure you understand the importance of secrecy with this, ensure that he has no idea of the scan.”

“Completely understood, Mr Jones. I will contact you this evening.”

## CHAPTER 12

# THE STALL

7th November 2105 17:45

A small warehouse, a clandestine production facility simply referred to as *The Stall* was used by four different operations, subscribers to the ZSS provided and protected facility. It was now the biggest production center in the Zone.

Dusk had set in by the time Marlow had called it a day. After spending several hours studying micro circuitry for faults and running the neural-caps through interface tests, his eyes were beginning to fail him. It was three blocks to the apartment and Zone Security didn't approve the use of the public taxi system so close to operations, so as usual a brisk walk was in order.

Arriving at the steel-plated exit door, Marlow looked into the small screen where Midsi and Frans could be seen monitoring terminals.

“Look at these little babies, they take one-eighty degree snapshots, then come online whenever something in the scene changes—our new batch of spy-eyes,” said Midsi holding up an object the size of a match head.

“Well, so long as it keeps our op protected Mids, that's all I care about.”

“Hey, take it easy out there! That character—Doyce I think you call him, is on the corner with some level heads, fucking prick just jemmied one.”

“Ahh, he's harmless, probably still after a piece of the pie. I'll see ya,

keep a watch on me—”

“Sure, Marz.”

The steel door shuddered as internal bolts unlocked it. Marlow pushed the hefty door which sprung back and locked behind him. He could see a small group of people at the end of the alley and on spotting him, the group began walking towards him.

“Hey Marz, word on the street your king-pin needs some muscle!”

It wasn’t what Marlow had expected. In the past Doyce had been hard up for credit and was after a delivery run.

“Yeah? And what makes you think that?”

“Something I hears along the line. Seems your man been knocking off the competition.”

Marlow thought about stopping, maybe try digging, see if someone’s got the heat on, but opted to walk past. Besides, Doyce wouldn’t know, he was digging. “And how’d you work that out?” asked Marlow as he continued past the group.

“Cmon Marz—only three people in the Zone got the snos to pull a stunt like that, two of them just got their heads fused.”

*Fuck it! Just keep walking*, Marlow thought to himself. He felt like calling Helix there and then, tell him how stupid, damned near brain-dead he was. He could hear the group following behind.

Doyce taunted Marlow again. “Marz? Hello? You do know who those nerds were involved with don’t you?”

Marlow knew—the Shamen set.

“Seems the Plato boys had a cull—”

*The Plato set?* Marlow’s heart sank another level. *How did word get out it was the Plato set?* He stopped and turned around, “Doycee, Doycee. You really have no fucking idea do you? You think Helix would get involved with a caper that would involve killing members of a Zone set?”

“Crazy ain’t it?” said Doyce, his sarcasm brimming over to a wide smile revealing a poor dental history.

Marlow turned around and continued along the alley to the main street.

“Hey Marz, want an escort home?” called a female member of the group followed by laughter.

Marlow hurried across the street and looking back saw them get into a shuttle. As usual in the Zone, there wasn’t much traffic, the transport grid making the necessary diversion from Zone territory. The street was quiet except for the occasional hum of a passing shuttle, and in the distance a bass drone, echoing through the cement canyon from one of Mansutti’s clubs.

Marlow felt edgy. He hadn’t felt this in a long time—insecurity—and he had the gut feeling he was being followed.

He stopped for a moment and crouched down pretending to do up his laces, as he did he glanced back along the street and heard the scuff noise when someone stops abruptly and just managed to see the feet in the shadows before they disappeared into an alley.

Marlow reached into his pocket, removed his gun and then squeezed the button on his ZSS pendant before standing and bolting along the pavement. He didn’t look back; he could hear the footsteps following. At the end of the first block, a group of pleasure girls tarted up to the nines were being surveyed by the occupants of two shuttles. Marlow knocked one of the hookers over as she proceeded to a shuttle after being chosen.

“Hey! Marz!” One of the hookers screamed and a few seconds later, “Hey! Pal! What you want with Marz?”

Marlow ran directly across the street, regardless of the traffic, putting his faith in their onboard sensors.

He could hear the sonic scream of a ZSS shuttle coming from behind, but daren’t turn around; he could also hear his pursuer. The scream got louder as the shuttle drew up beside him travelling at the same pace. The double doors slid open and Marlow immediately threw himself into the cabin.

“Hey brother, lucky I was near. That’s no small boy chasing you,”

said the driver firmly gripping the shuttle's drivestick with his right hand, gradually pushing it forward. "Man, he runs like the wind." The doors sealed shut. The driver was a dark-skinned man, with dreadlocks that glowed amber around his shoulders.

Marlow pulled himself up to peer out of the rear window. Breathless, he could see his pursuer slowing down and staring directly back at him. It wasn't anyone he recognized. He turned around and strapped himself into the rear of the cabin and still gasping for air asked, "Blake isn't it?"

"That's right. We used to live in the same squat bout six years ago, the Troy street squat. If my memory serves me, you're Marlow—Marz?" said Blake, whose pearly white rimmed eyes beamed in a rear view mirror at Marlow.

"Yeah, that's me. Back in Troy, eh? Just a pair of levelers, those weren't the days."

"No kiddin'. So you in some trouble right now? So where we headin' Marz?"

"How 'bout going back and running that guy down?" said Marlow, still taking an occasional deep breath.

"Hey, now you know it's against Zone policy to get involved in internal conflicts. Now if he was a Fed—" the driver had a small chuckle, "well he ain't got no place being here, so it would be my duty."

"Three-forty-two on eighth street—will do fine. And what makes you think he wasn't a Fed?" asked Marlow adding. "Can you patch me through to Midsi?"

"Sure thing, Marz."

"Mids," came Midsi's reply as a small screen pasted to the dashboard lit up.

"Mids. Listen. Obviously some shit's going down, and me an' Helix are in the middle," said Marlow.

"It does appear that way, and if word on the street is true, and it usually is, well, I can't see your head, Marz. "

“Jesus,” Marlow replied, “The Shamen set—so what now?”

“What now? Thought you boys would know better than to scorch another set—especially this one—they’ll make a tidy little profit out of your spare parts.”

“Don’t be so sure Helix and I were involved—”

“If that Doyce is correct and the Plato set were involved, every man and his bitch knows Helix is on the Mansutti debt wagon. You know, the way I see it, you’ve got two choices. You either graft your operation with Mansutti’s, or you close down operations in the Zone.”

“Is our pad safe? What about Helix?”

“C’mon Marz, we’ve got the whole fucking Zone to watch over, but since I listened to your acquaintance Doyce, I’ve been watching the entrance to your pad and all appears clear.”

“Jesus, OK Mids. Damn! Close comms Blake.”

“Ahh, before you do, I don’t think I need give you advice, but Marz, if Helix was the jack in that sting, best get him the hell out of the Zone. Ciao.”

Marlow needed to check up on Helix and quick.

“Here’s your drop-off, Marz,” said Blake bringing the shuttle to a stop.

The doors slid open but Marlow remained seated, scanning the area. Three people, two guys and a girl walked out of the lobby and got straight into a waiting taxi-shuttle.

“So, Blake, is the ZSS gonna watch my back?”

“We’ll watch it, sure, but won’t protect it. You know ZSS can’t get involved in set wars.”

“Set? Jesus, it’s just me and Helix.”

“I’m sorry Marz. Look I gotta get back on patrol—keep your pendant handy. I’ll wait here till you go in.”

Marlow eased himself out of the shuttle and headed straight for the tower entrance.

“Lix, it’s me. Everything OK up there?” said Marlow peering into

the scanner.

“Marz? What’s up? Yeah all’s fine,” crackled over the speaker.

Marlow could barley see a fuzzy Helix through the small screen. The door clicked open and Marlow cautiously entered the lobby. Ensuring the door locked securely behind him, he proceeded to the elevator.

Helix swiveled his chair around to face Marlow as he entered the apartment.

“The Shamen set!” called Marlow raising his arms to show some calamity of the situation adding, “Heard of them Helix?”

“Eh? Of course I have. Spooky freaks! A bloodthirsty set with the strange habit of dressing in hooded garments and wearing chromed neck braces embedded with weird symbols. What about them?”

“It just so happens that your little piece of neural cooking included members of that very set.”

“Oh—oh shit.”

Marlow stopped pacing behind the sofa. “Oh shit? Lix—the particular set in question had two of the best neural-jacks in the Zone. And so now—now they’re dead from a failed extortion attempt, who do you think the finger will be squarely pointed at?”

“Oh my God.” Helix fell back into his chair.

“The fact that you wiggled it with such skill puts you up on the pedestal as numero uno—LA neural-jack killer of the century, and besides that, word has it the Plato set were involved and, you guessed it, everyone knows you’re involved with Mansutti.”

“Jesus.”

“Well I wouldn’t bank on either of them helping us, and neither for that matter the ZSS—Midsi’s well intentioned advice is for you to leave the Zone, pronto—either that or tee-up with Mansutti. I think I just used our last piece of their support when I was chased by a goliath into a ZSS shuttle.”

“Chased?”

“Someone was following me, so I used the pendant and got picked up. Didn’t look like the Shamen type though. Man, he could’ve popped one straight in my back—real weird.”

“Mansutti’s been trying to get me over to his place all day, something about a business proposition—I’ve been ignoring him.”

“The Shamen set!” Marlow stopped pacing again and shook his head. “A set war is on the way and were smack bang, two pawns stuck in the middle!”

The room went quiet as the pair let the situation settle in their heads. Marlow sat on the back of the couch staring through the floor and Helix gazed into a void that was the center of the room.

Marlow broke the silence. “OK, so let’s see what Mansutti wants. We’re not safe here. We should get some protection from him, if he’s offering.”

Helix swiveled around to face his console and rested his elbows on the desk. He clasped his head in his hands. “Ahhh—what the hell is happening! As if this droid fiasco isn’t enough to deal with.”

“Any news there?”

“Nope—simple squat. I’ve had the clip in all day, sat on my ass here waiting for the slightest murmur. Nothing.”

“Any more thoughts on that? Actually, don’t bother telling me, I’d rather keep my brain empty on that score. Look, I hate to say it, but you better get on to Mansutti, see if we can cover our hides for now.”

Helix managed a reluctant grunt and tapped out the connect sequence to Mansutti’s office. Behind the desk a two-dimensional hologram of Mansutti lit up.

“Helix? You been on holiday? Got my message?”

“Yeah, Derek, got that.”

“Is that your partner in crime—Marlow?”

“Derek,” acknowledged Marlow.

“OK gents, so no doubt you’ve heard the news?”

“The Shamen set?” asked Helix who was now standing next to

Marlow. “So the tarmac and lines have my identity as the jack.”

Mansutti smirked. “That’s quite possible, Helix, the way things pan out, eh?”

Marlow immediately cut in. “So how’d word get out the Plato set were involved?”

“Mmm—that’s not important right now, Marlow.”

“What happened to making the sting anonymous!” snapped Helix.

“What is important is your security, which is why I suggest I send some gentlemen over to you right now and have you both escorted back here where we can talk biz.”

“So what are you suggesting?” asked Helix.

“I would like to offer both of you sanctuary here, at least for tonight, till we can sort out a safer environment for you boys to er, continue your operation—so what do you say?”

Marlow looked at Helix and gave a small nod.

“OK,” said Helix.

“Good, I’ll see you both when you get here. We’ll talk business over dinner.”

## CHAPTER 13

# ENTERING THE FIRE ZONE

7th November 2105 21:30

Leaving the Chelsea complex, the taxi shuttle accelerated making a large arc along the line. Darcy glanced over his right shoulder, in the distance overlaying the black sky stood the skyscrapers of the LA Fire Zone. Lights flashed by as the shuttle intersected a main trunk line, matching the speed of a long chain of shuttles causing them to separate and rejoin either side of Darcy's, connected only by sensors and air.

Darcy studied the occupants of the shuttle in front. Blonde girl, early twenties, pretty face from the side, head mostly shaved. Mouse guy, mid twenties, crew cut and attitude with a capital 'A'. He was facing the rear and staring straight back at Darcy with a glare the Stella agent yearned to destruct. If only the opportunity came Darcy's way, the pleasure, the satisfaction to show the imbecile that life really could be the bastard his face reflected.

The face made Darcy feel uneasy, not from the continued staring, but in the uncomfortable feeling that somehow this job reminded Darcy of himself in earlier years. Always itching for a scrap, any excuse to unleash an untethered anger. The Belltown upbringing had taught him well, had taught him disrespect, among other things, that he was number one and if you didn't like it then you had best keep quiet.

A line swooped down from the left shoulder and another shuttle intersected between Darcy's and attitude's. A contrast to the occupants

of the previous shuttle, now a dark haired man wearing a suit with his right arm around the shoulders of his partner who rested her shiny brunette head there upon. No doubt attitude would still be staring.

Darcy tapped his watch and instructed it to call Maxine.

“Darcy?” came the answer beneath an attractive hologram.

“Bout ten minutes to target,” said Darcy.

“OK.”

“Thoth ready?”

“All ready for the up-link patch code 5666, NIP address 223.5.66.6  
You got that?”

“You’re recorded—you got any news for me?”

“Bad news. Hamilton’s dead, his cover was blown.”

“Yeah? Real useful, IT in the Frisco caper. Told you Garnet was your man.”

“Mr Bishop would like a word.”

“Great,” replied Darcy sarcastically.

The hologram switched faces. “Darcy, you got Carone?” asked Bishop.

“They certainly have. I’m still in transit to his location.”

“How long ‘til I know where my droid is?”

“Thoth should be able to dig it out within about fifteen minutes of having Carone wearing a cap. I’m about ten minutes from rendezvous, so say within the hour?”

“Good. You want Maxine for anything else?”

“Not for anything work related,” replied Darcy and Bishop hung up.

Darcy managed a wry smile as he looked through the shuttle window at digital advertising boards rushing past.

## CHAPTER 14

# THE PROSCENIUM

7th November 2105 22:00

“The dealers have to be curtailed. I shouldn’t have to compete in my own club now should I? The orange bar has all the necessary stimulants your average visitor to the Zone might require, provided clean of course,” said Mansutti.

“Of course,” said Helix dropping an ounce of sarcasm.

The trio sat in a small private bar area perched on the highest level of the club, overlooking the orange bar and main arena. Helix stood and walked to the edge of the platform.

“The jewel of the Zone,” called Mansutti from behind.

Helix surveyed the club, noticing the security staff positioned at strategic locations. The dance area was littered with studded Goths, shaved heads, spiked heads, level heads all appearing to move in unison, tranced in motion to the sonic boom produced by a group of four calling themselves Isus. Holograms, images of clientele dancing in the central arena floated in mid air above the stage.

“I’ve got a call. You boys help yourselves to drinks, Zane will fix you up,” said Mansutti as he stood walking towards the door with his wrist pressed against his ear.

Marlow stood up. “You want another drink Lix?”

The ample dinner had left little room for drinks but Helix opted for one more. “OK, my usual.”

Marlow returned shortly from the bar and joined Helix with the drinks. “So what you really think about the proposal?” he asked leaning with one elbow on the railing and facing Helix.

“Not a real lot. The way I see it, we move the rest of the hardware, on the cheap, cost price if need be and—”

“Cost price?”

“Then get the hell out of LA.”

“Close business and run? Christ Helix, you can’t even afford a PID job, you won’t last a day out there. Our op is all we’ve got.”

“Was all we had.”

Marlow stopped for a moment, puzzled by what his partner was suggesting. He briefly looked down at the crowd then back at Helix. “What? This Alpha Two?”

“That’s our op now.” Helix breathed in deep, raising his eyebrows and returned to the leather lounge seat. Marlow followed and sat adjacent. Marlow began to gaze at the holograms and then dropped his glass.

“Jesus,” said Marlow repeating himself, “Je—sus. Hey, do you feel kinov ikky—”

Helix’s vision started to blur and the sound from the nightclub began to pound like a helicopter. “What the—”

The semdex had quickly taken effect, and both were out cold, slumped back in their respective chairs. Two large men rushed through the door and positioned themselves to carry Marlow. Mansutti and Darcy followed them in.

“Careful, we don’t want any bruising,” said Mansutti as the pair lifted Marlow and proceeded to carry him through the door.

Darcy inspected Helix, flicking the side of his eye. No flinch. Then checked his pulse.

“Good work, Mr Mansutti. I noticed Marlow spilled his drink. That’ll have to be considered when I reprogram their memory.”

“What? You can do that?” grinned Mansutti.

“Oh, we can do a lot more than that, Mr Mansutti.”

“Call me Derek, Derek’s fine.”

“Sure.”

The pair followed Helix’s body through to Mansutti’s office. Marlow was already sitting upright at the end of the desk, arms outstretched onto the table, his head resting against the back of the chair. Helix was positioned the same, the executive chair reclined slightly to ensure his head slumped directly back. The two henchmen left the office.

Darcy took a seat at the desk side, facing the screen and began tapping the appropriate Thoth access codes into the console. “You mind if I smoke?” he asked.

“Not at all. In fact, would you like a—”

“No,” replied Darcy abruptly, and produced a cigarette from his shirt pocket.

*“Welcome to Thoth, the world’s most powerful Neural Analysis Intelligence System”* appeared on the screen, spoken by a deep male voice.

Darcy picked up his back-pack from beside the chair and pulled out two unusually large neural-net caps.

“OK, you place that onto Carone,” said Darcy handing a neural-cap to Mansutti, before standing and placing the other onto Marlow’s head. “You’ll notice a switch on the back, flick it on after you’ve secured the velcro.”

The caps beeped in turn as they were switched on.

“So er, how many people have you scanned?” asked Mansutti.

Darcy paused before sitting back down at the console, then looked at Mansutti. “That’s confidential,” he replied hitting one final button.

*“Two neural devices found, beginning scan now — please be patient.”*

“As simple as that. You err, want a drink?”

“Orange juice will be fine.”

“So how long is this going to take?” asked Mansutti as he strolled to the small bar.

Darcy swiveled around on the chair. “The scan’ll take about fifteen

minutes, the memory implant about twenty-five.”

“And what’s involved with this memory implant?”

“This,” said Darcy reaching into his bag and pulled out what appeared to be a neural-cap attached to a pair of sunglasses. “I’ll put this on and backtrack to the drug point, this will feed Thoth your bar layout, the rest Thoth will pull from their minds. Thoth will then override their little semdex episode with some over indulgence at the expense of your bar. We’ll feed them some more alcohol, put them back in the chairs where they were drugged, and give them the antidote to make them come round. They won’t know the difference.”

“Wow,” said Mansutti returning with a glass of orange juice. “And these two will have handed over a lifetime of memories.”

“No, that would take hours to complete, and they would have to be coherent. This will scoop out whatever pressing issues are currently on their minds. Things you might be tossing around in your sleep.”

“Such as my business proposal—the Shamen set, and of course Alpha Two.”

“Got it.”

“So, will I be advised of their intentions? Could save me a buck or two.”

“That’s not in Bioscope’s interest.” Darcy stood and walked around to Marlow and checked his pulse.

“So you’ve always worked for Bioscope?” asked Mansutti.

“No.”

“FBI—ISA?”

“No.”

Mansutti took the hint.

After checking Helix’s pulse, Darcy took the neural device and walked out of the office and back into the private bar, Mansutti followed.

“Where’s the barman?” asked Darcy.

Mansutti leaned over the bar and pressed a button. “Zane’ll be here shortly.”

Darcy set the device onto his head and adjusted the velcro before placing the sunglasses into position and flicked a switch. He then paced around the bar area, scanning all directions and then sat in the chair that Helix had been sitting in and waited for the barman. Eventually, Zane entered the bar from a side entrance and hesitated when he saw Darcy wearing the peculiar device.

“What’s this?” he asked.

“Don’t ask questions,” Mansutti replied.

“OK Zane, pour me a drink, any drink from the top shelf.” said Darcy, clicking a button on his wrist watch. “And Derek, move yourself over there out of the picture.”

“OK,” replied the barman before following the instructions.

“Now, I want you to say: ‘come on guys, I’ll fix you both up a couple of cocktails, how bout a Zone Twister?’ ”

“Eh?” replied the barman.

“Just say it—as if you called it out to our guests while they were seated in the lounge chairs.”

“Er—OK,” he replied, “C’mon guys, I’ll fix you both up a couple of cocktails, how bout a Zone Twister?”

“Perfect.” Darcy stood and walked to the bar. “Now, I want you to say: ‘put down these two shooters an’ lube your throats while I make ‘em.’”

The barman managed to hold back a small chuckle to carry out the instruction. “Put down these two shooters—an’ lube your throats while I make ‘em.’”

“OK.”

Darcy left the drink on the bar and began walking around the platform. He then took a seat in Marlow’s original position and clicked a couple of buttons on his wrist watch.

“What’s he doing?” asked the barman.

“I said don’t ask questions,” snapped Mansutti.

“OK, let’s head back to the office.”

Inside the office, the screen indicated that the scan was complete, so Darcy proceeded to tap away at the console.

*“Subjects’ most recent position prior to doping established—proceed with instruction set.”*

Darcy proceeded to plug away at the keyboard. “You know this AI has a pretty good understanding of what can fool a mind—plenty of alcohol.”

*“Subjects: Helix Position A, Marlow Position B...extracting memory detail from subjects...please wait.”*

Darcy leaned back from the keyboard and lit a cigarette.

*“Detail of subjects extracted, please continue...”*

More tapping on the keyboard.

*“Barman...Zane...encouraged subjects to drink various cocktails—understood . Subject graft to original doping location. Two Bloody Marys to be served...OK?”*

“I presume Zane can fix up two Bloody Marys?” asked Darcy.

“Of course,” replied Mansutti.

“Thoth seems to think they enjoy that particular cocktail, and I’ve never known Thoth to be wrong.”

“Is that right? So why Thoth? The name I mean. All these AIs seem to have such idolistic names—”

“The Egyptian God of learning, kind of rings true, doesn’t it?”

Mansutti didn’t respond, opting to take a swig of cognac.

*“Presenting memory construct - subject perspective Helix Carone - continue?”*

Darcy hit ‘Y’ and the screen immediately reverted to a view from Helix’s perspective sitting in the lounge chair in the private bar finishing off his Pernod; Marlow sat adjacent.

“C’mon guys, I’ll fix you both up a couple of cocktails, how bout a Zone Twister?” called the barman.

“What you reckon Lix, why not: Yeah, two of those, Zane,” replied Marlow getting up from his seat and taking up a bar stool.

“Jesus Christ,” said Mansutti in disbelief at what he was witnessing. Helix followed suit, sitting beside him on another stool.

“Put down these two shooters an’ lube your throats while I make ‘em,” said Zane placing two dark liquids onto the bar.

“Bottoms up, Marz,” said Helix as the pair knocked back the liquor.

“This is what they’re gonna remember?” asked Mansutti.

“Vaguely, ‘tis a wonderful thing—alcohol, mixed with technology.”

“Maybe I should let Zane see this.”

“I would prefer you didn’t. Just let him know he’s been serving them Bloody Marys and the odd shooter.”

“Sure, but, I know these guys. They’re not going to fall for this, they’re not the boozy type, and they weren’t in the boozing mood.”

“Would you question your own memory of your actions?”

Again, Mansutti didn’t reply.

The pair watched the perfect memory reconstruction produced by Thoth, as Helix and Marlow consumed an exorbitant amount of liquor sitting at the bar and listening to fictitious anecdotes from the barman, before returning to the lounge seats each with a bloody Mary, the point to be grafted back to reality.

Darcy finalised the instructions required for commencement of the memory implant. “This shouldn’t take much more than twenty minutes, you best get your men ready for fifteen, they’ll need to cart these two into the bar immediately after the implant’s complete, I’ll then administer the antidote and alcohol injection.”

“Sure,” replied Mansutti taking hold of a control unit, “Kip?”

“Boss.”

“I want yourself and Rob present in my office in fifteen minutes, sharp.”

“Er, sure fifteen.”

“Anything else?” asked Mansutti.

“No,” replied Darcy rocking back on his chair and inhaling on his cigarette.

“OK, now it’s quiet time, let’s talk money.”

Darcy took a clip from one of several pockets lining the front of his shirt and slotted it into the side of the console. A soft female voice, accompanied by supporting on screen text, requested ID-login and password. Darcy tapped in the required information before being prompted for an eye scan. Mansutti pulled open a desk drawer, taking out the small scanning device and slid it across the desk to Darcy. Once the security identification was established, the voice requested account details for the transfer of one million, one hundred thousand dollars.

Mansutti grinned. “That’s a scar more than agreed.”

“Extra incentive from my employer to maintain professionalism where this issue is concerned. And, Mr Mansutti, there may be more should we require further assistance in the future.”

“Pleasure,” replied Mansutti inserting his account clip into the console.

*“Destination account - found - transferring funds.”*

“They say money makes the world go round—these days it’s zeros and ones,” commented Darcy, leaning forward to flick his cigarette down a vacuum tube.

Mansutti removed the clip from the console. “So, your boss, would he know by now, if Helix is guilty?”

“Thoht will still be analyzing the scan data.”

“And what do you think?”

“Me? I just carry out orders.”

Darcy stood up and removed his gun from inside his jacket.

“Ah, the famous ZX1,” commented Mansutti.

“It’s a ZX2.”

The chrome barrel sparkled around a small crystal display. Darcy turned a dial on the side of the weapon and strolled around to where Helix was sitting. He then pushed Helix’s head forward and placed the nozzle of the gun at the back of Helix’s neck and pulled the trigger. The only sound was a small beep informing the user that something did actually happen. The target area immediately turned red.

“That’ll be sore for some time, but—so are my ribs.”

“A tracking device?” asked Mansutti walking around to inspect the wound.

“State of the art. Helix will only be aware that he has a nasty boil on the back of his neck.”

“You Stella agents are quite a different breed aren’t you?”

“Equipped with only the best,” replied Darcy replacing the weapon.

He then pulled Helix’s eyelids open and took a scan of each eye before walking around the desk to Marlow and doing the same. “You’re on the Bioscope payroll now Mr Mansutti, make sure this Shamen set don’t get in the way and harm our friends here.”

“We’ll watch them like hawks.”

“Good.”

## CHAPTER 15

# THOTH

7th November 2105 07:30

Clemence Bishop sat staring impatiently at the large holographic head on the opposite side of his office. The graphic image of Thoth stared directly back, its face that of stern concentration, inhuman, the Egyptian God of learning was flecked with random dapples of color beneath a chromed sheen. Its mouth was just a thin slash and sunken beneath a long straight nose, and its eyes were squinting peering out across the office space. Occasionally the head would arc to one side, and Bishop would stop running his plump thumbs along the bottom of the desk hoping the AI was about to surrender Carone's furtive mind, then he would sit back in the chair and the process would be repeated.

He had only personally depended on Thoth twice in the past. He enjoyed the power of the system, its ability to delve beyond deception, a power commissioned covertly by government agencies, though they would never admit to it, and Bioscope would never admit that Thoth actually existed.

The head tilted back slightly.

*"Thoth has finished analyzing raw data from subject neural scans of Helix Carone and Marlow Wells. Accurate responses to some questions provided."*

"Finally," commented Bishop. "Maxi! You there?"

Maxine stepped in from the next office and stood beside Bishop's desk.

"Here goes—Thoth provide summary to pending questions," said Bishop re-igniting a cigar.

*"In reference to Alpha Two - Subject Helix Carone has partial indirect prior knowledge of a major incident affecting Bioscope provided by former executive Charles Langford."*

"Langford! Dammit!" shrieked Bishop thumping his fist hard onto the desk.

*"Subject Helix Carone had been made aware that, quote, ' Bioscope will lose an expensive employee from far away' and at that point he should take part in plans not yet outlined by Mr Langford."*

Thoth fell silent. Maxine, who was now seated on the edge of the desk, turned and looked at Bishop.

"Plans? Thoth, what plans?" asked Bishop impatiently.

*"Plans have not been outlined to either subjects. Helix Carone has been issued a code by Charles Langford 813588 and a neural access clip to be used for contact with a third party, a person he now presumes to be Alpha Two, and was informed that he is to remember the code as it will make him very wealthy. No other information pertaining to Alpha Two obtained."*

Again Thoth fell silent.

Maxine asked a question, "Thoth, what is the location of Alpha Two?"

*"Unknown."*

She continued, "Thoth, when will the plans begin?"

*"They have already begun."*

"Thoth, what are the subject's immediate plans?"

*"Helix Carone is planning to leave the Fire Zone as soon as possible. Marlow Wells is committed to the plans of Helix Carone."*

Maxine stood up to face Bishop. "We've got biometrics. If he leaves the Zone he'll have to use the transport system where he'll be pretty easy to track, and if he has a bogus PID card, we've got him bugged."

“And how long do you suppose that will remain?” asked Bishop, his tone agitated. “I want to know everything about Langford. His movements, his contacts, his finances, where he played putt-putt.”

“I’ve already tracked his movements within Bioscope’s divisions as a general security check—after his death.”

“Now all we need is the other side of his life—however boring that may have been.”

“I’m on it,” said Maxine turning to make an exit.

“And fucking get Darcy onto it!” shrieked Bishop as he threw the remnants of his cigar at the hologram.

## CHAPTER 16

# LA FIRE ZONE – BUGGED

8th November 2105 10:00

Lyrics from a favorite song rang true in Helix's head, *Someone cast these fears away—cast them into a distant day*. The escort was packed, loaded—two of Mansutti's disposables. The company were ugly. Wren, the larger of the two, wore a leather, no doubt nanocarb-reinforced singlet, forearms covered in computer inked tattoos making them look like chain mail. The other referred to simply as Nuuk, was slightly smaller but still larger than either Helix or Marlow. He had a withdrawn pock-marked face and chain smoked. Helix didn't want any of it, but there he was, packing the out of date ZX1 charged and loaded. As usual, Marlow was carrying; he was more accustomed to wasting brethren than Helix but even he hadn't triggered off for over a year.

The company were gonna make it hard to move fifteen boxes on the cheap without raising Mansutti's suspicions. He'd kill them for running. Helix felt like dropping in on Charlie with the escort and say *Hey, look at me now, is this too involved?* But that was petty. Charlie would know by now anyway—too bad, he was going to miss the secure drinking nest. And drink? Not for a long time after last night—whatever had gotten into him? Marlow was worse, he never could handle the repercussions of the day after.

Somehow they had managed to persuade one of the security to wait at the lobby entrance, and the other to wait in the foyer. Of course they

protested that Mansutti had insisted they not be let out of sight, but fuck Derek, we're supposed to be partners now and besides we'd feel more secure with you guarding the entrance.

Helix had a feeling like he had one foot in quicksand and the other in the middle of a minefield. He couldn't sleep the night before—never could after a heavy session and besides that, a boil had erupted on the back of his neck and was throbbing. He emptied the safe and filled his jacket with clips. Marlow grabbed three boxes of neural-caps with Helix taking the remaining two and they left the apartment for the last time.

In the elevator, Helix noticed that tattoo heavy had the first three fingers spliced to a prosthetic. He in turn noticed Helix looking at it and promptly explained how it used to be a standard reflex job but now had nerve endings giving him feelings similar to a real hand. Mansutti had covered the cost as a bonus for a job well done. Neither bothered to ask what the job was.

“So, where next?” asked Wren.

“Over to the Stall to pick up more of these,” replied Helix.

“The Stall?”

“A Zone Security outfit on Sixth Street.”

“Friggin ZSS.”

“They saved my ass, on more than one occasion,” commented Helix.

Wren made a grunt of disapproval and as the elevator doors opened, pointed his weapon at the ready. “OK, c'mon.”

The pair followed their escort to the waiting shuttle, throwing the boxes into a hatch at the back. It was an old style shuttle with all the seating facing the front, Marlow rode shotgun next to Wren.

It wasn't long until Wren spoke. “So you guys know much about this Shamen set?”

Marlow answered with his expertise on the subject. “They're along the lines of a religious cult, decked out with implants to access the subnet

and rumour has it, dealing in human parts for export to medibanks.”

“Yep, religious cult, eh? They’re responsible for the recent slicing up of several leveler street kids which possibly lends itself to that particular export trade. Mansutti’s pretty pissed with them as it is, thinks it’s bad for business, and I agree. What about you?”

“Of course, the biz is the important reason for being pissed at them,” replied Marlow adding, “So what’s Mansutti gonna do about it?”

Wren chuckled. “Cut their balls off and make dog meat.”

To the annoyance of Helix and his delicate stomach, Wren would occasionally push the drive stick to make the shuttle take the corners harder, then release allowing the automatic guidance to take over. Feeling that the effort to make Wren drive with more finesse could just tip the balance, he opted to keep tight about it.

Helix ran over in his mind the previous night, the cocktail deliveries, it was all so vague. Somehow the night had turned into party mode thanks to an overzealous barman. He reached up to the back of his neck with his left hand to feel the size of the boil which seemed to throb in unison with his headache.

Finally, after a short drive of ten minutes which seemed to Helix more like thirty, the shuttle came to an abrupt stop at the entrance to the Stall and the four climbed out. Marlow pressed something resembling a door bell and peered up at the tiny screen recessed into poorly cut corrugated sheeting.

Midsi’s bright face barely lit up the dull screen. “Ahh—the dynamic duo return, and with company,” crackled from a speaker. “The company can watch the door.”

Marlow looked around at the gruesome pair, Wren acknowledged his approval with a small nod.

“No problem. Just open the fucking door,” said Marlow. The steel door immediately shuddered as the locks released and Marlow pushed, holding it open for Helix to follow him in.

As usual, the acrid smell of fresh solder and flux saturated the air.

Someone could be heard tinkering from one of the six lock-ups, as the pair walked to their own. Marlow slotted his key into the padlock and unlocked the door. Inside were two workbenches on opposite walls covered in assorted tools, mostly soldering equipment. At the far wall, neural-caps dangled from a makeshift rack having already been burnt in and tested. One corner beside the rack housed a screen pasted to particle board and a console deck.

Helix slid two hefty bolts securing the door behind him before walking to the console and slotting in the clip Langford had given him, piggy backed onto his profile clip. “Let’s see if this android is ready to rumble.”

Marlow began turning flattened cardboard into boxes and proceeded to fill them with the completed neural-caps.

They were a team. Since the day they met, things seemed to click—they had a perfect balance well suited to Zone circumstances, and right now they were one. Neither needed to talk to the other, each knew what the score was.

Helix swung a homemade tubular steel body support from the rack and sat up onto a wooden stool, dangling his arms over the support before reaching for a neural-cap and securing it onto his head. He flicked a side switch and within a second fell into the trance of the neural-net. A clean surge ran through his body as pure white light replaced his material vision. Eventually the surge settled and his hands and arms came into view accompanied by a sterile hospital odor.

A voice rang out, “Helix Carone?”

A body formed from the stark white, directly in front of Helix and about five metres away. It was a large man, mid thirties, dark cropped hair, blue eyes, and wearing a purple business suit.

“I’ve been waiting for you Mr Carone.”

“Alpha Two?”

“Correct. Do you mind if I call you Helix?”

Helix paused amused as the common formality sank in. *An artificial intelligence that had just escaped from the moon was concerned with*

*formalities?* “Helix is fine.”

“Last night Helix, you were scanned by Bioscope’s neural analysis system, Thoth.”

Helix stepped back, puzzled by what Alpha Two was suggesting. He sighed. “Mansutti.”

The droid’s profile stood straight and tall—hands in front clasped together, fingers interlocked. “Indeed. It was to be expected. You know nothing anyway. That contingency was not left to chance.”

“So what now?”

“You need to get clear of the Zone without being tracked. Of course this means they are likely to have your most recent eye biometrics. I have arranged for you to undergo surgery to remedy your PID problem. That is the next stage. The other implication is that you are likely to have been bugged. Have you noticed any strange lumps or boils?”

“A bug? Jesus—yes, I have a boil on the back of my neck—since last night.”

“Its removal will be rather painful. You’ll need someone to help you.”

“Marlow.”

“Yes Marlow, good. He’ll need a sharp knife—preferably a razor. A pair of fine tweezers. And something for you to bite on. The bug will be an SPE, Short Pulse Emitter—transmitting an approximate location every five minutes.”

“OK.”

“Marlow must slice off the boil, so that it’s level with the surrounding skin. The tweezers must penetrate two millimeters beneath the surface and clench the device. Once he has a firm grip he must pull back directly and the device will be extracted.”

“Just how big is this bug?”

“The tip is a millimeter in diameter, the attached antenna extends four millimeters beneath the surface.”

“Fuck.”

“Once removed it must be kept at body temperature otherwise Stella

will be made aware of its removal. Place it somewhere warm, such as under your tongue temporarily, but don't swallow it. It is of paramount importance that you, and your partner, lose any tail in preparation for the next stage. All taxi shuttles in proximity of the Zone are requiring biometric identification, so they're out of the question."

"The next stage?"

"A new identification—"

"That's two new identifications."

"Of course. I have arranged with the PID supplier to pick you up as soon as you're ready, as in now."

"We've got two of Mansutti's goons to lose."

"You must. Your pickup awaits. Obviously they cannot come to your current location so the pickup point will be the alley running parallel to Second Street behind the Orana squat. From there you will be taken clear of the Zone. Can you manage this in half an hour?"

Helix hesitated before replying, "Yes."

"Mr Langford has set up a dummy AI to impersonate me—running out of San Francisco. I've installed its locator on the clip as an option, should you feel the need. That is all, Helix. Get it sorted and get back in contact when you've gained your new identity."

The console rushed into view like a stream of light surging from his retina accompanied by the screeching of packing tape. Helix removed the neural-cap, placing it upon the bench, before swiveling the body support back to the confines of the mounted wall rack. Marlow had just sealed the last box of caps.

"Contact," said Helix as he felt the presence of the boil. "We've been scanned."

"What?"

"Our drinking session last night was a memory implant, care of Bioscope."

"Jesus."

"Or more so, care of Thoth, Bioscope's NAS AI. Even worse, I've

been bugged with a tracking device, a boil on the back of my neck which you'll have to remove. What about you? You got any spots, boils or anything since last night?

Marlow checked his neck and then started frisking himself. "No, I don't think so."

"Just as well." Helix reached down and lifted a black plastic toolbox onto the workbench and proceeded to pick away at its contents. "Get a cup full of warm water—body temperature warm to throw the bug into when you've extracted it. Have we got any Band-Aids?"

"No. There's some cotton wool inside the box, under the tray. We'll have to use packing tape."

"OK."

Marlow left the lock-up and returned with a cup full of warm water and again bolted the door. Helix handed him a razor blade and placed the tweezers onto the workbench.

"You need to cut the boil level then insert the tweezers about two mil, clasp the bug—then just pluck it out, OK?"

"Sure."

Helix turned his back to Marlow and braced himself, leaning forward on the workbench with both hands. "Swab the blood with some wool. The bugs about one mil in diameter and four long."

Marlow dipped a lump of wool into the cup and began to slice the boil level, Helix barely flinched. He dabbed the blood with the dampened wool then took the tweezers and proceeded to push them beneath the surface. "OK, I think I've got it."

Helix clenched his teeth as Marlow pulled the device out.

"Fff..aaargh."

Immediately Marlow dropped the tiny device into the water. "It's out. Hang on," he said swabbing the dripping blood with damp wool until it was as clean as possible, he then took a piece of dry wool and placed it onto the affected area. "Hold that for a moment," he said as he ripped off a section of tape. "OK, move your fingers." And the job

was complete.

Helix peered into the cup. “Fucking Mansutti.”

“You got that right.”

“They’ve got our biometrics.”

“Figures.”

“The robots arranged a PID change for the both of us.”

“For us both? Someone’s got some spare cash.”

The pair looked at each other momentarily. Then Helix’s watch beeped and Mansutti’s face projected three inches from its face. “Speak of the fucking devil!” Helix removed an ear piece from the side of the watch and inserted it into his ear.

“Yeah, Derek, fine, no problem. You know ZSS, wouldn’t let them in, shouldn’t be too long—OK.” Helix replaced the ear piece adding, “Prick”

“So when are we making the break?”

“Now. We’ve got to be in the alley behind the Orana squat in thirty minutes.”

Marlow looked at all the boxes of neural-caps realizing their loss. “Rather pointless boxing this lot up.”

## CHAPTER 17

# MOURNING IN PARIS

Peppi's morbid descent still ran its course. Her teacher, a life-size hologram, stood arms crossed and glaring from the far wall of the basement, an educational AI whose character profile was purposely very plain. Aged in her mid-forties, Miss Tatari wore her usual drab grey suit to complement her lifeless brown hair. The homework had been set: a combination of algebra, trigonometry and English comprehension, but Peppi had no time for pointless exercise. The AI provided no sympathy and since none of her afternoon exercises had been done, blocked her access to the neural-net.

Peppi, dressed head to toe in black, was seated in a small garden area under the warmth of late afternoon sunlight streaming through a thick glazed roof. The lush subtropical plants glistened in the sunlight casting shadows over parts of the terrace. It was Peppi's favorite time of day. Miss Tatari's strict voice again resonated from the walls of the basement.

*"Mr Bishop will be home soon to deal with you. You must finish the exercises set. Then you can go for your walk in the neural-net."*

Peppi continued to ignore her teacher's persistent demands, instead toying with her salad provided care of an automated kitchen somewhere beyond the inner wall. All she wanted was to return to the neural-net. She had sat in the garden terrace for three hours, occasionally reading a page from her novel but failing to concentrate amid Miss Tatari's constant interruptions. Perhaps Snoopy would be there to take her on

an unrestricted venture as he had the day before. The stupid AI thought a walk in the neural-net was all that was required. Peppi was sick to death of the teacher, sick of algebra but most of all, sick of the basement.

She speared a cherry tomato with her fork, popping it into her mouth as one of the budgies landed on her shoulder, a holographic copy of a past pet. “Lucky, you must be sick of this basement, too, but then, you’re no more real than her.”

Peppi called to her stereo instructing it to play a random list of pre-programmed heartfelt songs. The bird immediately fluttered back to its perch in the corner.

“I thought you liked this song,” she said standing and slowly swaying to the music, momentarily glancing at her watch.

Her teacher’s hours were seven o’clock in the morning to three o’clock in the afternoon, with three break times, then continuing through to five in the afternoon depending on exercises set and whether it was accomplished. But not this afternoon. Only ten minutes were left until Peppi could venture into the neural-net. Usually she would meet with two friends at around four. Of course they were normal kids with normal lives, having just returned from a real school in the real Paris and eager to connect up with this strange girl with an occasional stutter. Of course Peppi had made other friends in the neural-net, but most didn’t bother to stick to a weird friendship based on cyberspace; only two did.

Relishing their opportunity to practice English on Peppi who spoke it perfectly and so eloquently, Aimee and Gabrielle made sure they met with her in the park beside the lake at least three times a week. But it was more than just English that drew them to Peppi. It was her charm and unique character that they found so interesting, Peppi was unlike any of their other classmates. Where other girls were pre-occupied with boys, Peppi would talk about books she had read. She would talk about philosophy and the sciences, and share music that the pair had never heard of.

Aimee and Gabrielle had been best friends for many years and shared many classes at school where they would talk secretly about this strange cybernet girl called Peppi. For almost a year they pondered over why she would never let them meet her in person. Why she always stuttered when talking about herself in any detail. On one occasion they entertained the idea that she was an AI provided by the English government to help them practice English and found themselves rolling on the classroom floor in tears of laughter, much to the distress of their tutor.

Then one day, Peppi told them that she suffered from an allergy to everything and lived in a contained bubble shut away from the rest of the world. The neural-net was the only place where she could experience what it was like to be really alive. When asked if they could come and see her in person, inside her bubble, Peppi had flatly refused wishing them to only view her bubble free. She also requested that her condition remain a secret, and it did.

Tears again streamed down her soft pale cheeks as she listened to a song that reminded her of Papa. She checked her watch. It was five o'clock, so she walked into the main basement area and stood beside the pool, staring at the artificial teacher in all her glory as she and the blackboard disappeared.

“Go! Go! You stupid machine!” she yelled.

She ran into her bedroom, taking hold of a neural-net cap and sat in position leaning against the headboard. She secured the cap upon her head and flicked its switch.

Rain washed over the park. As always in the virtual Paris, the destination weather was the opposite to the real weather outside.

“It’s raining, I love the rain!” she cried and ran down the hill towards the lake.

She stopped at the edge of the lake and licked the water from around her lips, brushing the rain from her eyes and stood in a trance watching the

sways of rain spraying across the surface of the water. Her depression subdued by a sense of hope. She turned to look back at the bench on the top of the hill. Nobody was there, so she started to walk along the side of the lake and realized that she was the only person around. *No point being in a virtual park when the real thing would be basking in sunlight*, she thought. Then, a bicycle bell rang out from behind startling Peppi who turned, immediately recognizing Snoopy.

“Do you think you should be riding a bike in this weather?” she asked.

Snoopy stopped the tandem bicycle beside her. “Do you want the front or back?”

“Since you’re already on the front, I’ll take the back!”

Peppi swung her leg over and took hold of the handlebars. “Ready when you are!”

“Well, start peddling! You can’t expect me to do all the work just because I make up ninety percent of the weight!”

Peppi struggled to get the bicycle in motion. “Ar—don’t you think you should peddle, just a bit?”

The bicycle wobbled slightly as Snoopy raised his feet to start peddling, causing Peppi to scream as she momentarily envisaged them plunging into the lake.

“And we’re away. Not bad for a beginner.”

“What do you mean a beginner?”

“This is my first time!”

“The first time?” Peppi asked as she began to assess why a person would never have ridden a bike, even she had ridden bikes in the real world. “What do you mean, this is your first time?”

“Yes—I’ve never been very adventurous with this sort of thing!”

*Adventurous?* thought Peppi even more puzzled. “Where are we going?”

“Perhaps somewhere to dry off—somewhere dry. How about an African safari?”

“A safari—” Peppi muttered astonished.

“What was that Peppi?”

“A safari! Great let’s go!”

“OK, keep peddling, Androcies will bind the location—the Serengeti National Park.”

Peppi looked ahead and could see shimmering gold, the dry plains of Africa. Immediately their clothes changed to a basic and very outdated safari outfit causing Peppi to erupt in hysterical laughter.

“What’s so funny?” Snoopy asked.

Eventually Peppi managed to calm enough to answer. “Look at your shoes and socks, you look ridiculous!” she said as she pushed her own long beige socks down to her ankles.

Snoopy looked down at his outfit replying, “I think it looks superb.”

“Your socks would fit me as leggings, push them down like I have!”

Snoopy guided the bicycle to a large towering gate that was the entry point to the wilderness park and stopped alongside a mesh fence where the pair dismounted. A small group of people all wearing similar safari outfits were gathered at the gate entrance where a park ranger was discussing general park rules and cautions.

“OK you two may as well join this group,” called the gangly ranger before continuing, “Now as I was saying, the animals within the park will act as if you are not there unless you yell, or move suddenly—so don’t run.”

“What happens if you run?” Peppi asked.

“If you run, you turn into dinner on legs, so don’t.” The ranger added extra volume ensuring the entire group could hear. “This is still the neural-net. There is absolutely no danger to any of you inside this park, but the animals will seem as real as in the African savanna. If you run, the animals such as a pride of lions may decide to attack you. In that case, as soon as the animal touches you, you will be returned here to the gate. Game over.” The ranger walked around the group to confront Snoopy with a small funds transfer console and stared at Peppi.

“Of course the experience can be quite daunting and there is no refund. Please enter your account details, the charge for two is one hundred dollars—”

“One hundred?” commented Snoopy.

“This sim is even better than the real thing.”

After the transaction was complete the ranger returned to the gate and pressed a button causing it to slide open. “I would advise you all to stick together as a group. Some people can find it quite intimidating when confronted with a pride, or a baboon.”

“What if we touch the animals, are we returned, game over?” Peppi asked.

“No. You are returned to the gate only upon being attacked.”

“How long is the tour?” Snoopy asked.

“Following the track will return you here in about three hours.”

The group headed into the park along a dusty narrow track that wound its way through dead grass and thickets on either side. Peppi was by far the youngest. There were two couples in their mid to late forties and an older woman, possibly over seventy but very fit in appearance.

“So is everyone in their real character profile here?” Peppi asked the group.

The old woman turned to Peppi and said, “Yes, dear, do you think I would come along as this old hag if I really looked as young as you?” The pair shared a small chuckle.

“Wow—just look at that!” said a female heading the group as she reached the start of the descent to the plains below.

It was the Serengeti in every way. The hot dry wind, the sound of crickets, a vulture circling high above the open plain dotted only by small tufts of trees and in the distance, herds of grazing zebra and wildebeest.

“Glad you decided to take the neural plunge now, hey Missy,” said one of the men to the old lady.

Missy was almost speechless. “Sure—sure is something, Seth.”

The group stood at the top of the hill in awe at the spectacle below.

“Come on, let’s get down there!” said Peppi unable to contain her excitement.

“Remember, no running now young lady,” said the woman.

“Of course—um, I’m Peppi by the way and this is my brother—um, Snoopy.”

“Snoopy? Well, I’m Missy, and I don’t think I could bare to watch a big cat mow you down.”

“Nor could I,” Peppi replied smiling. “Besides, it would sure be a waste of a hundred bucks.”

Peppi led the way down the track and was followed by one of the couples then by Snoopy, Missy and the remaining couple.

By the time the group had descended to the bottom of the hill, Peppi was at least a hundred meters ahead of the first couple and the distance was increasing. Snoopy finally managed to get around the couple and started gaining on Peppi.

“Peppi, wait there!”

“Run!” Peppi called in return before turning and continuing at pace.

Snoopy looked around at the grassland on either side of the track for any sign of predators and then started to increase the speed of his walk accompanied by an occasional ridiculous hop.

“Peppi, I’m not going to run, so please wait there.”

Peppi turned around to check his progress. “OK, since you said please, I’ll wait.”

Finally he reached the grinning adolescent and asked, “Why are you getting so far ahead?”

“I want to talk privately with you.”

“OK, what about?”

“You. You and Papa, but mostly you,” Peppi said, squinting into the sunlight as she looked up at the giant.

“Your Papa and I worked together as you know.”

“Yes here? Well, in Paris I mean.”

“That’s right, in Bioscope’s AI research and development division.”

“So you met Papa there?”

“Yes, five years ago.”

“So where are you from, where were you born?”

“Denver—USA, April 15, 2078.”

“So you’re twenty seven,” Peppi said.

“That’s right.”

“Wow, so you met an executive of Bioscope at the tender age of twenty-two, you must be very talented at what you do.”

“Your Papa, he liked to be involved with the front line rather than being stuck in his office.”

“Like Bishop?”

Snoopy hesitated before replying, “Yes, like Bishop.”

“Papa did create Bioscope with the late Harry Bishop.”

“Ah, Mr Harry Bishop, possibly the greatest geneticist who walked the Earth.”

“Look Snoopy!” Peppi called pointing at a cheetah resting in a nearby tree.

“Ssh, quiet Peppi—let’s not get eaten.”

Peppi started to walk slowly towards the tree. “You’re very big Snoopy, but I do believe you’re scared. Come on, it’s only a sim.”

“We don’t have much time Peppi before Mr Bishop will be disconnecting you, so wouldn’t you prefer to get up close to a pride of lions before he does?”

Peppi stopped walking and turned around. “Yes, you’re right, let’s get a move on then.” As Peppi returned to the track she sighed. “Bishop—and the basement. So you are going to get me out?”

Snoopy sighed, “Yes, I am.”

“How?”

“I can’t tell you at this stage, Peppi. Mr Langford has set you, that is, your freedom, as my prime directive. I certainly won’t be attempting to reason with Mr Bishop.”

“Never! Papa and I have constantly tried to convince him it’s safe, but he’s too worried about himself, and Bioscope.”

“Yes, well, the most important thing for you to do is to continue on acting like you’ve never met me—none of this has happened. As we speak Androcies will be puppeting you somewhere else in the net. I cannot stress how important it is for you to keep all this secret from Mr Bishop.”

Peppi stopped walking and turned. “He had Papa killed didn’t he?”

“No!” Snoopy replied also stopping. “Mr Langford died in a shuttle accident.”

“Accident? I saw the news. How often do shuttles run into barriers? That’s ridiculous!” Peppi paused a moment before adding, “And what about this robot, Alpha Two? I hardly see Bishop since it escaped—except, that’s good. To him, it’s like I don’t exist which seems to be what he would prefer. I don’t think he has a heart. He doesn’t care about me at all.”

“Of course he does.”

“He only cares about himself, and the reputation of Bioscope. Not enough to consider what I might want. He’d rather have me rot away in the basement, or perhaps even kill me and do away with the whole Peppi problem.”

“He’s not as evil as that. Peppi, you shouldn’t think like that.”

“He is, he’s evil. He used to be much nicer, when old grandpa Harry Bishop was alive. Things were much better then.”

“Come on,” Snoopy said holding a hand out.

The pair continued along the path holding hands, towards a mixed herd of wildebeest and zebra. As they approached Androcies intervened, for Peppi it was time to go.

## CHAPTER 18

# ZONE BREAKOUT

8th November 2105 10:30

*'Good luck'* and *'bon voyage'* were Midsi's last words to the pair as he released the bolts to the Stall's rarely used side entrance. He sat staring and chuckling into the screen as he envisioned Mansutti's reaction to their disappearance.

The pair surveyed the street for any sign of a foe, which pretty much meant anyone. Midsi had already told them that Wren and Nuuk were still waiting at the opposite entrance, so they walked quickly, keeping their heads low in case they were recognized. They turned into the first alley, walking in the shadows of adjoining buildings occasionally stepping into the sunlight to negotiate an overturned dumpster—someone's home. A dog launched itself at Helix, jaws snapping, luckily it was tied to the back of one of the dumpsters and Helix managed to jump far enough to be out of it's reach.

"Jack! Shut up!" called a man, having been woken from inside the dumpster.

They walked in silence, both firmly gripping their weapons aware of the dangers of the Zone's formidable back alleys. Marlow offered Helix some gum, concluding his partner's mouth would likely be as dry as his own and Helix accepted. They turned into another alley but stopped on observing some nasty looking levelers squabbling in the distance.

"We'll try the next road," said Marlow turning and leading Helix.

Doyce appeared from around the corner. “Well, well! If it isn’t Marlow and his smarty from the big smoke!”

Marlow immediately pointed his weapon directly at Doyce’s forehead.

“Hey Marz, settle. I was just on my way to the Stall to warn you of the Shamen’s price on yer buddy there.”

“Yeah, sure you were Doyce. Helix shoot him.”

Helix already had the ZX1 from his pocket. He checked the LCD display and shot the semdex into Doyce’s chest. It took only a moment and the man collapsed. Marlow broke his fall then dragged his body to the side wall of the alley, saying, “Maybe you were Doycee but we can’t take that chance right now.”

“I wonder how much I’m worth,” pondered Helix.

They arrived at the pick-up alley after walking for nearly ten minutes from the Stall but could see no shuttle. As instructed, the pair made their way along the alley. Along the right side were a line of garage lockups, the odd one being opened up and sporting an unhealthy stench of urine—some alcoholic’s shelter.

It was while passing one such shelter that Marlow was pulled to one side and forced into a crouched position at gun point. Helix stopped, raising both hands in the air.

“Name?” asked a stocky man of Italian appearance.

“Marlow.”

“Then you must be?”

“Carone—Helix Carone.”

Another man stepped from the shadows behind Helix, a tanned Hispanic look with slick black hair, well dressed.

“From now on neither of you are Helix or Marlow.”

The grip on Marlow was released and the man offered his hand saying, “I’m Frank and this is Tony.”

Tony walked to the next lockup and pulled open the garage door revealing a shuttle car. “This way.”

They boarded the shuttle and it made its way along the alley and onto a

main street. Helix absorbed what he hoped were his last images of the Fire Zone. Makeshift tents, ripped green tarpaulins thrown over crates and accommodating entire families. Market stalls selling everything, even vegetables. The streets were lined with levelers scraping a living from those needing a shot of adventure. Helix had almost forgotten what the normal world was like. He remembered times spent working for Bioscope in Paris. Spending weekends with his girl, Jane. Langford and his sense of humor. Langford's tip off and his escape back to the US. He thought about the future which right now was appearing more unpredictable than ever.

The shuttle made its usual jolt as the four wheeled chassis disengaged leaving the shuttle to ride the magnetic line. In the distance Helix could see the complexes. The new LA. He looked at Marlow who was sitting diagonally opposite and noticed him taking in the new scenery like a tourist.

Helix decided to break the silence. "So where are we heading?"

"The surgeon's knife, that's all you need to know," replied Tony who was sitting directly opposite. "Fraid we'll have to blindfold you for a large portion of the journey. The location, as you can understand, is secret."

Frank looked at Helix and said, "You two must have made some dough in that dump to be able to pay for this."

"I was working on it," replied Helix adding, "but an old friend chipped in."

"How long you been in the Zone?"

"Me—bout two years, my comrade there close to fifteen."

The escort looked at Marlow with raised eyebrows looking for a response.

"What can I say? Mum's dead. Dad's a drunk," Marlow paused. "Dropped me off there when I was twelve. Got looked after from the start by what I consider to be a very wise man, a guy by the name of Monty. Set me straight—till he died. Some bastard that couldn't get

his kicks out of sims. Blew off Monty and some other levelers—good friends of mine, turned them into mince meat while they slept,” said Marlow his leg bouncing like a sewing machine. “I took him out, one shot and he was dead.”

Frank shook his head and glanced at Tony.

Marlow gazed out of focus, his lips trembling. “Didn’t feel like justice—felt like nothing.”

Frank hesitated before asking, “How old were you?”

“Sixteen, but hell, that’s the past. There’s a golden beach somewhere and I’m gonna write my name on it while sipping Pina Coladas. Ain’t that right, Lix?”

Helix smiled at Marlow, “I’m not Lix any more, Mr Bloggs.”

Frank added, “That’s right, it’s gonna take some practice, guys, but you two had better forget each other’s true identities. That’s the last time you call each other by your former names.”

“So what’s our new identities?” asked Helix.

“Don’t ask me, you’ll find out after the op. We only know the names on the way in—on the way out, could be Bloggs.”

The shuttle veered down an exit line and back onto a high street for half a kilometer before turning into a residential side street where it came to rest.

“OK, this where we switch cars. Try and throw the transport grid. Just a short walk for a couple of blocks.”

The four climbed out of the shuttle, Tony was last after setting the shuttle to return to some preprogrammed destination. Marlow stretched his arms above his head and said, “Ah—freedom! As fresh and real as any sim.”

“Real—er,” replied Helix.

The four made their way along the tree lined street, across another main street, around a corner and finally arrived at the switch vehicle. It was an executive shuttle, metallic silver with black tinted windows.

They climbed in and took up their original seating positions. Tony lifted a middle console open and removed two scarves.

“OK, guys, place these over your eyes for the rest of the journey. Sorry about the heat, the air conditioner will kick in soon.”

Marlow reluctantly took his scarf and donned it asking, “How long till we get there?”

“About an hour.”

Having to wear a blindfold also deeply agitated Helix. He wanted to see what the north side of LA now looked like, what anything looked like, try to flush the insane images of the Zone. He felt the shuttle re-enter another line and felt the warmth of the sun on the back of his neck calculating a continued northerly direction. *I finally made it out of the Zone alive and am about to have my biometrics modified. It sure didn't come too soon*, he thought to himself before asking, “So how many—a year? PID changes I mean?”

“Not many. Few can afford it, and as you can appreciate, those that can don't tend to need it,” said Frank.

Helix nodded. “Many from the Zone?”

“No, only about three in the past five years. Haven't been inside Zone territory for two, things have gotten even worse there by the looks.”

Marlow couldn't contain his curiosity and asked, “Who?”

“We're professionals. So what's it like, living for two years in the Zone?” Frank asked Helix.

The darkness provided by the blindfold made it easy to conjure multiple images of what Helix had witnessed, flashing before him in an instant. “To me, it's the closest thing to hell on Earth. You keep to yourself, don't let anyone know your hand. If you can afford it, you pay the ZSS to watch your op and yourself—and you plug on.”

“Persevere,” added Marlow. “If you're not in a team—a set—you're a walking organ donor.”

“It's not life, it's merely existence,” continued Helix.

“So why, or how, did you end up there?” asked Tony. “Better you

don't answer that—needless to say circumstances of sorts would have forced you to hide out there.”

“That's about it,” replied Helix.

“After the op' you'll be looked after like royalty, until your grafts are healed. Good food—yep, find yourself a good book and relax by the pool.”

“Relax? The contrasts of life never cease to amaze me,” said Helix.

The thought took a while to sink in. A pool and staff serving up good food. Any food was good compared to most Zone takeaways. But nothing to do, that was something to look forward to. Of course, there would be a neural connection and he itched to find out more about these plans that Alpha Two had alluded to. Not that anything would be forthcoming. He was still puzzled. Why a droid? Why not a human? Trust? Strength? Something that required the droid's strength, speed and agility? It's intelligence level would be close to par with that of a human. It's ability to recall information and analyze statistical data on the fly would surpass that of a human. Perhaps that was the key.

Whatever the reason, it must have been a good one. Langford was opposed to autonomous artificial intelligence from the outset. *'Without Spectra'* he used to say, *'a well developed AI will go AWOL as soon as its synoptic learning curve reaches a point where it realizes its only limitation is its creator—us.'* So what was so important that he would allow a droid loose beyond Spectra's control? It was glaringly obvious that although they were true friends holding dear so many shared virtues, there was a large portion of the old mans life to which Helix was not privy.

Eventually the need to rest, assisted by the gentle rocking of the shuttle overcame Helix, so he slumped in the seat resting his head against the window and left the conversation to the other occupants. The run from Paris was tame in comparison to the previous forty-eight hours and the strain was starting to take its toll. He tried relinquishing any thoughts of Mansutti, Bioscope and the Stella agent, preferring to concentrate

on more pleasant thoughts. His childhood and times spent on the river.

He imagined being laid back with his eyes closed and hands outstretched dabbing the water, slowly drifting along with the current in his boat. The river and surrounding land was a green oasis within an industrial estate. Throughout summer on warmer days he would spend all his spare time on the river estuary, searching out yet to be explored channels amongst the reeds.

Back then the neural-net was just a figment of someone's imagination, most likely Langford's. Neural transceivers were still in their infancy. The magazines he read then, projected today's reality. It was all so exciting. So he started programming. While his dog would entertain itself with the wildlife along the river he would be busy tapping away at his console, writing code to do his math homework. Just plug in the figures, and out come the answers. Code to crack his friend's consoles giving him the ability to chat to anyone in disguise, harmless fun. But that was then and code was relatively harmless. Little did he know then that his ability to code would take him to the altar of programming. The neural-net.

## CHAPTER 19

# BUGGED OUT

8th November 2105 11:00

With his singlet saturated with sweat from the morning's workout, Darcy threw the sliding glass door open and walked out onto the sun drenched balcony, clasping his watch in his left hand and inserting an ear piece. Allowing a slight breeze to dry off his underarms, he took several deep breaths, clasping his hands behind his head. The news that blipped on his minicon had stunned him. How could a former Bioscope software engineer possibly know one of Stella's best kept ZX2 secrets, the bug boil?

"Dial Mansutti."

"*Calling Derek Mansutti,*" crackled in his ear.

"Darcy," said Mansutti.

"Mansutti! Just how well are your team watching my target?"

"I've got two of my best with them at a ZSS outfit—Zone Security wouldn't let them in."

He tried to remain calm. "Wouldn't let them in? Stella have just received a signal indicating the bug has been removed. Think you'd better get more than just two of your best down there and see if they can find them."

"The damn ZSS! I'll see who I can spare."

Frustration overcame politeness, "Spare nothing Mansutti—understood! Get people on every corner around the location. They're

not gonna leave in a shuttle, they'll be on foot. If they've gone, you'd better fast come up with a solution to track them!"

Darcy removed the ear piece and slotted it into his watch.

He realized it wasn't so much Mansutti's problem as his own. He knew they would run clear of the Zone, that's where the bug was supposed to work, and he was pretty confident they already had. He thought about the rigorous tests the ZX2 had to go through, perhaps there was something wrong with the healing gel causing the end of the shaft to remain noticeable. He returned inside the apartment and grabbed the weapon, popping the gel capsule out to inspect its expiry date: June 07—it still had another eighteen months.

He slumped into the lounge, stroking his hair into place before issuing commands for visual communication with Maxine.

"Maxi, bad news! I guess you already know?"

Maxine sat up in bed hair ruffled and enticing. She yawned, pulling an aerated quilt up to her chin. "I know, I assumed you would have plans to track them down. Have they disappeared?"

"No, I don't know yet. I've got Mansutti and his set investigating, but most likely, yes."

"So where do I fit in? You're a big boy now. Fix it."

"It's Bishop. I don't want him to be informed. I should be able to track them down soon. Of course, it won't be cheap so you best open up a whole new budget for my next target, the ZSS."

Maxine managed a more confused face than just sleep deprivation provided. "ZSS? You think they'll help?"

"I've never met a man without his price."

Maxine smiled a sexy acknowledgment. "And that would explain *your* budget Mr Jones. Well, Bishop wants his robot, do it. You finished?"

"Sweet dreams," Darcy paused. "Hey, what time is it there?"

The connection closed.

Darcy took one sniff of himself and headed for the shower. An ultra

modern bathroom finished throughout in alloy for easy steam cleaning. He liked it, a modern outfit for an ultra modern guy. Darcy was never one for old-fashioned ideas or values which he considered weak. If the money was there and enough of it, the job was as good as done.

The shower was brief. He looked at his clothes which were mostly too neat by Zone standards. He donned a black nanocarb reinforced shirt and black trousers with lined pockets for clips and weaponry. He took the ZX2 and checked the charge rating on the LCD display.

His watch beeped an incoming call. It was Mansutti. He held the strap to his ear.

“Darcy, bad news, I’m afraid. Seems they’ve gone.”

“That’s no news, Derek.”

“So, what next?”

“I want the ZSS agent that runs the outfit.”

“Huh? You want him? I’ll slice him open when I catch him!”

Darcy continued to inspect the gun. “Not before I use him. Who is it?”

“Use him? Good luck! A scerik, goes by the name of Midsi.”

Darcy slotted the gun into a front pocket. “Good, you got a contact number?”

“Did have. They switch everything. Nobody even knows where their HQ is, they’re like fucking little rodents.”

“Then I shall have to present myself at this outfit and see if I can broker a deal.”

“Mind you don’t get shot to bits.”

Darcy smiled. “That’s where your set come in. OK with you?”

“Sure, for a price, of course.”

Darcy sighed. “I’ve no time to waste, I’ll make my way to your club now.”

“Sure.”

Darcy tapped his watch to hang-up the call and then opened the door to the minibar taking a bottle of orange-juice to his mouth. He finished the bottle which he threw into a trash can, then walked into

the bedroom. He checked his appearance in a full length mirror, double checking that his weaponry was concealed before making an exit.

Darcy walked across the central mall of the Chelsea Complex like a black panther, attracting glares from families in the midst of doing their weekly shopping. It was leveler clothing, a safeguard against a trigger-happy environment. The mere sniff of resemblance to any type of authority would attract a not-so-stray bullet.

He climbed aboard a waiting taxi shuttle, the automatic doors closing behind and it began its ascent to the complex shuttle line.

*“Destination, please?”*

“LA Central.”

*“That’s Los Angeles Central....Please state specific address.”*

“The Proscenium.”

*“Destination: The Proscenium nightclub: Los Angeles Central. OK?”*

“Fine.”

*“Time to destination: eighteen minutes.”*

The new LA disappeared behind in the form of adjoining megaplexes. The shuttle jolted, switching lines and intersecting a long stream of shuttles and taking its rightful place, a spec in the transport grid. This particular public shuttle included a distinctly nasty body odor from a previous occupant. Darcy lit a cigarette to assist in killing the stench.

## CHAPTER 20

# PID SURGERY

The operation was swift, no sooner had they arrived at the surgery than they were under the surgeon's knife. The healing gel included a mild anaesthetic, too mild on all accounts. Helix felt as though he was auditioning for some weird type of space dance, holding his hands out in front and unable to move his fingers. His eyes burned like grains of sand had carefully been inserted around the edges. He leaned forward, sucking coffee through a straw and gazed across the room. He wondered what the surgeon looked like. The faceless champion that had turned him into someone else. Someone that had never existed.

For the first time in two years he felt calm. Perhaps it was the clinic or the drugs, probably a combination of both. Whatever it was, here was a sanctuary far from the knife's edge that was the Zone.

He finished the coffee and moved to sit on a leather lounge running the length of a patio window. Warm sunlight streamed onto his back through Venetian blinds. He laid his bandaged hands to rest upon his lap and began to doze. Again, his mind played out the possible reasons Langford could have to sabotage an android, but none made any sense. What role did he have to play in this next stage? He heard a door open and opened his eyes to find a young and very attractive lady carefully closing the door behind her. It had been so long, Helix had all but forgotten how good a well-dressed woman could look.

“Sorry, did I wake you?”

“Er, no, I was just dozing.”

“OK, Mr Slate, I’m Andrea, I’ll be looking after you and the other gentleman during your recovery. How are you feeling? Your hands will be tender for a couple of days.”

“Mr Slate?” replied Helix with raised eyebrows.

“Yes, Simon Slate, your new identity. How do you like it?”

Helix nodded approval. “Mmm, apart from the initials, it has a nice ring to it.”

“Good. And how are you feeling?” She stood two paces in front hugging a tablet to her chest.

“Sore eyes and hands of course but worth every ounce.”

“Yes, I’m sure.” She turned slightly pointing to the screen. “Would you like the television on?”

“No, thank you.”

“More coffee?”

“No.”

“Anything else? Probably best not to drink anything stronger,” she said, gradually stepping backwards towards the door.

“No, I’m fine.”

“If you do just ask, just say Andrea assistance, and the computer will beep me.” Immediately a beep rang out and Andrea touched the face of her wrist watch to switch it off. “There it goes. I’ll be your host, consider this area your hotel room. Your bedrooms are through that door, they both have ensuites. The television and stereo are voice activated in the usual manner and if you want anything to read and it’s not on the coffee table just let me know.”

Her smile could have made Helix melt into the lounge suite. “How’s my friend doing?”

“Fine. Shouldn’t be too much longer. OK?” she replied as she left the room carefully closing the door behind.

“Fine,” replied Helix to himself.

She reminded him of his only serious relationship, Jane Flemming, whom he hadn’t seen since returning to the US when the heat was on

in Paris. He often wondered whether she still thought of him. What she might be doing and where. Whether she could forgive him. He didn't get the chance to say goodbye. He had thought about sending her an encryption clip so they could meet in the neural-net. Of course, she was out of bounds. Stella would have her monitored, like hook bait.

In Paris he had been sloppy and it cost him. Vividly, he recalled the day that came crashing down around him. A clip encrypted with eight months of source code priming the neural-net backbone. Nothing was meant to leave the central office. Staff called the central office, the black hole. Nothing could escape, not even light, just to ensure Bioscope's latest software monopoly. Langford encrypted the code and handed it back to its genius, Helix, after bypassing security. A sixteen digit encryption key was also passed on to Helix, who promptly made a copy for himself, writing the key onto a pad next to his console and there was his downfall. The clip was sent and paid for through a fence in Brussels, the funds of which he donated to several orphanages. He posted the key on receiving payment. Two days later Langford notified him that he was sprung and it was time to run. He left the office and left everything, penniless but worse still, source-code-less.

“Television on—CNN, current news on Bioscope,” said Helix.

The Bioscope logo, a 'B' encircled with a cross in the center, accompanied the right-hand side of the news presenter:

*News Item- Bioscope:- It has been revealed today that Bioscope has strong evidence that the Alpha Two model android had been sabotaged allowing it to control itself independently from Spectra—Bioscope's AI autonomy protection system. Bioscope is still no clearer as to who or why. However, investigations suggest it was an inside job. Stella are investigating several strong leads that they say point to staff appointed in high security clearance positions within the company as being responsible. Several staff members have been stood down pending the investigation.*

*The news has slightly improved Bioscope stocks, up twelve points since the media release. Analysts say that until confidence is restored in Bioscope's Spectra system, and the International Space Agency get the green light for the remaining androids to continue functioning as usual, Bioscope stocks will still remain relatively low however.*

“Television off.”

The news, as to be expected, had no surprises for Helix. They had scanned him and found out what he knew—close to nothing. By now Stella and most likely Mansutti would know he was gone, a glass of water can only stay warm for so long. He grinned at the thought as he leaned forward and started carefully sifting through magazines on the coffee table.

As always there were several outdated *Time* magazines as well as *Neural-net US* and *Neural-net UK* headlining topics such as ‘Safety Net?’ and ‘Are your kids safe?’ Conveniently, the tips of his bandaged fingers had small rubber pads allowing him to more easily, though still rather awkwardly change pages.

He glanced over with fleeting interest articles on the ever increasing addictiveness of being wired up to the neural-net, cyber-junkies hooked into European sim sites. Dirt cheap and wired for pleasure.

The nurse who had guided Helix into the room now escorted the omnipresent Marlow in, carrying a coffee and positioning it onto the table where Helix had sat originally. “There you go, have a seat but be very careful with your hands—give the grafts time to heal.” She had a caring yet stern face wrapped with a wholesome figure. She looked down at Helix. “And how are you feeling, sir?”

“I’m fine,” replied Helix adding, “and it’s Slate, Simon Slate.”

“Good Mr Slate. I’ll return to change your bandages this evening.”

The nurse turned and left through the same door.

Marlow looked at Helix. “Simon Slate?”

“What do you think?”

Marlow remarked, “Nice initials.”

“Apparently your name is Frank Underwood.”

“Funny.” Marlow took a sip of coffee before asking, “So do you know what my name is?”

Helix shook his head, returning his attention to the magazines. “No.” “You know they’re gonna cut our hair? I’m going back to the knuckle—it’s either long or not at all.”

Helix laughed, sitting back into the lounge. “In that case, I better go for short back and sides.”

Marlow choked on his coffee before asking, “Are you sore?”

“My eyes more than my hands. They’re starting to itch already.”

“Same.”

Helix looked at the magazine on his lap. “There’s an article here that states around twenty people have now died while playing crack-a-jack.”

“How?”

“The usual, cardiac arrest.”

Marlow flopped his head back. “Ahh, crack-a-jack,” he said sliding his hand across the table and pointing a finger at Helix. “I’m sergeant Keith Gunner, nobody—but nobody messes with Gunner!”

“Well Gunner! Didn’t you hear what I said?”

Marlow returned rhetoric with a command fit for a cyber sergeant. “Mr Slate! Do you have any idea what I said! Nobody—but nobody messes with sergeant Gunner!”

“As usual, I’m wasting my breath.”

“Slate, I have a young cardiovascular system that has served me well in many of life’s more, shall we say, pressured environments. Some people take the game too seriously, and forget it’s just a game. I’ve had my leg blown off, a bullet has gone through my left shoulder, and I’ve lost many good men—none! I hasten to add, none—*that I know of*, have died in this dimension, the one called reality.” Marlow finished taking a breath and said, “Chuck us the article.”

Helix leaned forward and frisbeed the magazine to Marlow who

managed to trap it on the table with his elbow.

Marlow had his own philosophy, unaffected by popular doctrines. It didn't matter what people said to him, his mind was made up on just about everything. At Zone parties he would fall into debate with people 'tripping' on psychstims and somehow wangle the conversation around to his perverse beliefs. After spending fifteen minutes talking to prospective proselytes, some would start flipping out right in front of him. He called it recruitment.

"So what does Sergeant Gunner have to say now?"

"Well, it's obvious. There are too many people playing these hardcore games that shouldn't be. You know, pay the man, get your arteries cleaned real good. These are the people that are nervous as shit. I know the sort, you turn around a tree trunk and catch them unawares. They start to shiver and cower down like a real bullet is about to rip them in half. I said to this one guy; look, it's only a game—who you trying to impress, if you want out, leave."

"So what he do?"

"Well, the admin call in crack-a-jack can be real tricky if you haven't got your wits about you."

"So what you do?"

Marlow pointed his bandaged fingers at the bridge of his nose and said, "Plugged him, straight between the eyes. Taking them out like that throws 'em straight back to the admin manager, anyway, nothing felt. Now, if I plugged him in the stomach, he could have been struggling for a while. You ever have one of those nightmares where you get plugged in the guts an' wake up with bad gastro?"

Helix sighed inexperience, "No."

"Kind of like that." Marlow leaned forward taking another sip of coffee before muttering, "Got a big assault tomorrow, my men need me. While we're stuck in here I might give one or two of these Amsterdam sites a try. There's one here called the Alpha-Bet." Marlow began reading

the passage, “The setting’s the sleazy cyber streets of Amsterdam. You start in a bar and take a drink of some kind and that drink then sets your game plan. You then have to make as much money as possible and live for two hours. Sounds like fun. Apparently the drink where you run the most risk but gain the most reward is called the Fact-Or-X shot. Says here that those who have tried it call it the chill-factor-x, you’ve got to try it to understand—mmm, might just do that.”

“You’re crazy.”

## CHAPTER 21

# LA FIRE ZONE – THE HUNT

Darcy was again subjected to poor body odour which was now manifested in the form of five of Mansutti's muscle, all tightly compacted in one of the Proscenium's private shuttles, Darcy was middle back. A motley crew, unshaven, visible skin graffiti tattooed in black mesh and symbolism common throughout Zone territory. The apparent leader, appendaged with a cheap prosthetic, poorly layered electroclasp was sitting to his right, clasping a gun.

A goon sporting silver spiked hair perked up. "I told you, see, we got to workin' with ZSS, then they pull a stunt like this on us. We help them, they fuck us over, what the hell's Derek bin thinking?"

"Hey, shut it! Show some respect!" yelled the prosthetic job.

Darcy declined to sympathize.

The goon continued, "So you're Stella, right? Got yourself one of those—what is it—X tooz?"

"ZX2," replied Darcy.

"Let's have a look, eh?"

Darcy willingly removed the weapon from inside his jacket and handed it over.

"Hey man, you trust me with this? Fuck! Look at this, you ever see anything like...like it's a fucking laser gun or something," he said as the three sitting on the opposite side of the shuttle leaned over to inspect the weapon.

"Pull the trigger," said Darcy.

The man grinned revealing an enameled set of teeth that seemed to match his hair. “You fucking kiddin’ right?” He raised the weapon and outstretched his arm to point directly at Darcy. “Hey maybe I will and take a shot at your pussy ass.”

“Do it,” said Darcy.

He pointed the weapon towards Darcy’s left ear and pulled the trigger. “Ah! Fuck!” he screamed dropping the ZX2, Darcy just managed to catch it.

“Guess we don’t share the same biometrics,” said Darcy as he replaced the weapon inside his jacket. The group laughed.

“...thing electrocuted me.”

“Shut it, Decks!”

The shuttle finally pulled to rest and the prosthetic job climbed out first, stepping aside to let Darcy out, followed by the other four.

“Press the button, then talk.”

Darcy walked to the steel door and pressed a button on its left. He looked at the positions of Mansutti’s set, either side and facing towards the alley.

The speaker crackled. “What’s wrong, Demeron? Worried the ZSS might send round a posse? Tell Mansutti’s meat to clear out of ear’s shot.”

Darcy turned around acknowledging his approval with a small nod. The company moved to each corner of the Stall. “Are you Midsi?”

“The one and only.”

“I’ll come clean, I’m the—”

“I know who you are Demeron. Who do you work for?”

“Bioscope, I’m a Stella agent.”

“Figures. I know the information you want—” A long pause followed and then Midsi added, “Two former ZSS members on the run from Bioscope—one could say the odds were stacked against them.”

“Especially with the money on offer.”

“Money is certainly your key—but, then there’s the System’s reputation to think of. What constitutes upholding our simple motto, *‘To protect to the end.’* Perhaps that ended with their termination from the System.” Midsi silenced and then gave a small chuckle. “Helix Carone—certainly don’t think you’ll catch him, he’s turned into something of a Zone legend.”

“So, money.”

“Ah, well, we shall have you meet one of *our* agents and make a transaction. We give you the shuttle involved, and you give us currency. Come with one of Mansutti’s men, Wren, the one with the plastic arm to Lipson street. There’s a six story office block, number one hundred an twelve, we’ll be waiting in the lobby.”

Darcy looked to the corner of the Stall where Wren stood smoking a cigarette and called him over. Wren looked at his accomplices with a frustrated expression and began walking towards Darcy.

“They want us two to meet them at Lipson street office block,” said Darcy as he climbed into the shuttle, Wren followed.

Noticing Wren was still smoking inside the shuttle, Darcy decided to light up before instructing the shuttle to the address.

“So that ZX2 of yours, what does it do exactly?” asked Wren.

Darcy exhaled saying, “Most of it’s classified.”

Noticing the anticipation on Wren’s face Darcy decided to reveal his favorite utility. “OK, I guess you may already know this one. It has a wire line attached to an epoxy-hexcement fuse which can be fired into a wall, allowing its user to jump off of tall buildings, should one ever need to.”

Wren smirked and nodded.

It wasn’t long before the shuttle arrived at the office block. Wren climbed out first followed by Darcy who led the way into the lobby.

Waiting inside, two armed ZSS operatives stood either side of a relatively smaller and younger agent who sat behind a portable cards

table, wearing a black baseball cap and scrappy loose black clothes. He glanced up at the pair before returning his attention to his console and continued to tap away saying, “Wren, you wait on the steps outside, we just want Mr Demeron to feel a little more secure.”

Wren lit another cigarette and walked back outside as Darcy put his out, mincing it into the floor under foot.

“OK, you’ve got your account clip?” asked a wagging mouth barely visible beneath the cap.

Darcy reached into one of several pockets running down the front of his trousers and produced a clip, checking the scribble on the side to ensure it was the correct one and handed it to the operative who then slotted it into the side of the console.

“We want five hundred thousand—no less or the deal’s off.”

Darcy grunted. “You don’t come cheap.”

The operative swung the console around to face Darcy who promptly entered the required details to fulfil the transaction before removing his clip and returning the console to its original position. The operative continued to tap away until the transaction was confirmed. “OK, now for our side of the deal.” He swung the console back to face Darcy and leaned over pressing the play button. “This is what was recorded by the System as Carone and Marlow left the Stall to the pickup point. Of course we could just give you the shuttle details, but this will certainly convince you that we have given the right information.”

Darcy watched the screen as it tracked the pair making their way along several back alleys. He held his watch to the screen and took snap shots of two Hispanic males that had been waiting for them. “That time stamp, is it accurate?”

The operative sniggered. “Completely in sync with the transport grid, which I’m sure will be your next stop.” He held out his hand and said, “Thank you for your business, Demeron.”

## CHAPTER 22

# THE ALPHA-BET

Marlow was only three minutes into the neural-net game named *The Alpha-Bet*, the underworld of the Amsterdam cyber streets. Two hours and a bar stood in front of him from which to make as much money as possible. Nobody's walking into virtual clubs and taking stuff, liquids, anything you want for your own personal experiment. Inviting glassware, soothing colors and the taste etched to perfection.

Marlow gazed at the strange concoction now positioned on the bar.

The barman grinned in anticipation. "You wanna fry a little, friend?" The man laughed and added, "You won't rip from this trip!"

The drink glowed blue, swirled and sparked as if embodied with electrical static charges.

"You done it?" asked Marlow.

"Three times. Freaks the shit out of me. You know when you know," said the barman rubbing his nose and adding, "I'm Lazareth, twenty-eighth on the leaderboard. You won't get near that score with these other drinks. Only a FOX can get to that level." Lazareth then held a fist up to Marlow and said, "Chin chin."

Marlow raised his right hand, clenched his fingers and tapped Lazareth's fist. He then slowly lowered his hand and took hold of the shot glass.

"You gonna go sick! Sick!" yelled the barman unable to contain his excitement. "Pupils, that's all we are!" he said pointing two fingers at his eyes, "Pupils of the light."

Marlow threw the Fact-Or-X shot into his mouth, tilted his head back and swallowed. The cold came screaming through every nerve sending a burnt message. Chill factor X. His mind warped to super analysis then an epiphany. Words rang true and now he understood them. X was superfluous, beyond understanding. The chill was real and beyond death to the point of X. Like a drug, any drug—all drugs, receptors fine tuned to its perfect caress. A fatal belief in the masses, that their brain could ever fully recover, that they would one day continue, normal without its injection, satisfying aeons of *evilution*, the Yin. He needed Yang, more drugs or a fucking good psychstim. He'd do a job, any job—plug someone for a hit and there was plenty of work.

Space and time condensed into matter. Light such to be nothing and more powerful than anything. A fix of some kind, any kind—but seemingly impossible. He stumbled into a street that was dark, shiny and damp.

A cockney accent called out, “Fox! I got the antidote—the fix you crave—but you gotta do a job. Don’t fuck it up, or you’ll be craving for two hours instead of two minutes.” The man offered Marlow a gun. “Head up the street into a club called the *Let’s Go*, tell Tony on the door Darian sencha.”

Marlow took the weapon and did as instructed, arriving at the entrance cyber sweat dripping from his chin.

“You Tony?”

“Who wants to know?”

“Darian sent me.”

“Is that right—a FOX?” The Dutchman laughed then bent down to Marlow’s ear and whispered, “OK you got two minutes. Inside there’s a bad ass, a big black mother fucker pimp called Willis, another FOX wearing a red tracksuit and surrounded by whores and muscle. You won’t be able to get near him for a clean shot, you won’t be able to look at him without being belted, let alone raise your piece. You clip him, you jump behind the bar and a safe will open, inside cash—forty

thousand and an antidote. You got the balls?”

“Out the way...” Marlow placed his right hand on the gun and pushed through a poorly lit crowd.

It wasn't long until he found what he was looking for, another player.

“Hi Nouno Urho, I'm Liz.”

“What? You one of Willis's whores?” quizzed Marlow.

“Willis who?”

With that Marlow grabbed her by the arm and dragged her through the crowd towards a corner where he could see the likely muscle. An obelisk sized character turned around to face Marlow. Marlow caught sight of the flecks of a red tracksuit.

“I need to speak to Willis, this bitch just tried to pull one over on him.”

The muscle frowned in confusion and made a fatal mistake in stepping back and turning around to Willis. Marlow lifted the gun and shot at the tracksuit square in the chest, he then stepped backwards with the girl in front using her as cover. Bullets tore into her as Marlow dove over the bar. The safe was there, the cash and the antidote, and beside the antidote another concoction labeled, *God Mode*. The bar was still being shredded by bullets so Marlow drank the God Mode and gave it a test, standing up into a hail of bullets and returned fire until his piece was all that made noise. Of course it was a test, he could have just gone straight for the antidote, but that would have been game, set and match. Game over for some.

Helix, meanwhile, observed Marlow in the flesh, flinching on the sofa as if in the middle of a crazed nightmare. He watched the scene unfold on the screen, watching Marlow take himself to extremes that most men hadn't the bottle. It was only while viewing Marlow in cyberspace that Helix could ever come close to understanding what dwelt within. Years of a Fire Zone upbringing embodying a hardcore reality, for Marlow the virtual was an escape for what still burned inside.

Not wanting to endure any more, Helix took a magazine and walked

around to the side of the sofa pressing a button beside a glass door which opened onto a small terrace containing an even smaller pool. A beige wall two metres high surrounded the terrace and judging by overhanging branches, Helix calculated the terrace to be two to three stories high.

He walked barefoot around the pool and across tiles warmed by sunshine that only partially broke through the shade of the tree. He carefully sat down on a white plastic deckchair, padded with green cushions.

*Where in the hell am I?* Helix thought. He found the notion of not having any idea where he was disturbing. If it weren't for the skin grafts, he would move the chair to the side of the wall and clamber up for a peek, see if anything looked familiar. He knew he was north, far north of LA. He returned his attention to the magazine—an article on Lunar One.

Thoughts of contacting Alpha Two had entered his mind on more than one occasion during the day but had been put off by the need to sleep. He glanced at his watch. It was three o'clock. He then returned his attention to the Bioscope article. Photos of both the Alpha and Delta model androids accompanied the article and explained how Bioscope had intentionally made them physically identical to humans to help people working alongside them feel more comfortable. Helix laughed at the irony.

It was the AI construct programming that made them truly resemble humans. The spherical three-sixty degrees of scope endlessly ticking over its past and plotting its future, manifesting its *personality*. Degrees to simulate happiness, sadness, anger and all the other human traits, and the effect of that upon the AI's logic. A degree of belief, randomness and chaos coerced into logic, fuzzy logic. Learning from the consequences of mistakes, better judgement and its benefits, all mapped for self analysis and self adjustment—some called it construct growth, others construct maturity, the essence of an Artificial Intelligence.

Helix had never seen a completed android, in the electroclasp, the flesh, the finished product. Spectra was his domain. While the droid constructs were rigorously being developed, he was coding the software to monitor and regulate them, not that any programmers had access to the finished product—that was the province of the android engineers. He took a moment, sat back into the chair and considered how this piece of machinery would be coping in the real world. Langford must have put a lot of effort into its construct to make it *fit* into the human world, otherwise it would never have lasted this long unnoticed. Helix pondered over what the droid—Alpha Two—would be doing right now. What does an android on the run *do*? No doubt it would have a room somewhere, probably with a backup battery pack on charge most of the time. It would also be likely to be carrying a couple while on the move. But move—where? Probably, he thought Alpha Two would spend most of its time jacked into the neural-net, waiting...in anticipation to project the next move to Helix.

A gentle breeze occasionally made the leaves rustle above, the odd one spiraling into the pool. Helix could find nothing further of interest in the magazine, so he placed it upon his chest, closed his eyes and began to doze.

## CHAPTER 23

# LA SUBURBS

Darcy quietly set his briefcase on a glass dining table before walking through to check all the rooms in the apartment were empty. Returning to the lounge room, he walked to the mantle piece lifting up a picture of a smiling couple, both aged in their late twenties to early thirties. The male, of Hispanic appearance was on closer inspection, a match to the image displayed on Darcy's watch face. Concluding he had broken into the correct apartment, he replaced the picture and walked through to the kitchen, opened the fridge door and began removing items to make himself a sandwich. His watch blipped reassuringly with the current location of the private shuttle within the transport grid; he'd set it to sound an alarm as soon as the home destination was set on the shuttle.

The sandwich was too plain for his liking, the fridge only supplying the basics: cheese, lettuce and tomato, not good for a carnivore. After eating the sandwich, he walked into the bathroom, switched an extractor fan on and lit a cigarette.

Lovingly decorated with three types of marine creatures against a cyan background, Darcy found it repulsive. He rested against the bathroom sink, with his back to a wall mirror, ears primed for the sound of the alarm.

The expected confrontation didn't pose any real concern for Darcy. It was the same stakeout routine he had performed countless times in the past, these days he enjoyed it. He finished the cigarette and threw it into the toilet, then turned off the fan and returned to the dining table.

He unzipped his case and flipped the top back onto the table revealing several tools of his trade. Switch blades, knuckle-dusters, various ZX2 attachments and cartridges. Some he rarely used, but one tool he felt would suit the job at hand, he removed. A steel shaft bent in a semi-circle with two live cartridges on each point, called by Stella agents the ‘lock-down’ he had only used it on two prior occasions.

On the far side of the kitchen top he noticed a letter rack and proceeded to flick through the letters until he ascertained the name of his target: Tony Carera.

The alarm on his watch beeped. He switched it off and checked the approximate arrival time: fifteen minutes. He waited.

In due time Darcy heard the shuttle being elevated then parked outside the front door and so positioned himself to the side of the door which would obscure Tony’s view of him. As the man closed the door behind him, Darcy grabbed him by the hair and throat and threw him hard back against the wall. The lock-down in Darcy’s right hand exploded, punching two holes through the plaster either side of the man’s neck, pinning him to the wall.

“Aargh, you fuc...”

The man tried easing the strain by grappling with both hands on the steel shaft but it was no use.

Darcy punched hard into the man’s stomach. “I won’t have that sort of language, not from someone in your precarious position,” he said while frisking the man. “It’s really hard when your whole body wants to curl up and recover some breath.” He removed two guns and a knife and threw them onto the sofa. “Tony, isn’t it? I’ll let you catch your breath—while I grab myself something to drink.”

Darcy returned from the kitchen with a carton of milk and a dining room chair and sat directly in front of the man. “OK Tony, I want information, not nasty language.”

Beads of sweat ran down the sides of Tony’s face. The shaft had

him pinned slightly lower than his actual height forcing him to stand awkwardly. He stared down at Darcy breathing heavily, teeth clenched tight. “What’s it you want?”

“You picked up two friends of mine, from the Fire Zone this morning. Helix Carone and Marlow somebody—who and where are they now?”

“I don’t know what you mean!”

Darcy placed the carton onto the floor, stood up and casually walked over to stand in front of Tony. “Why do you people always make it so hard for yourselves?” *Wham!* Darcy punched him hard in the stomach again. “I’ve seen people die in your predicament.”

Tony coughed and spluttered incomprehensible words as he tried to suck air back into his lungs. His eyes were shut tight. Darcy returned to his briefcase and removed a metallic object fitted with a small butane gas cylinder. He clicked a switch and a blue flame ignited, heating the end of the device.

Tony glanced momentarily on hearing the hissing sound of the gas, then yelled, “Look. I have money! Take whatever you want!”

Darcy grinned as he slowly walked towards his victim, holding the torture device up for inspection of the tip. “I designed the brand myself. It’s my football team, a football with a halo around it, see,” he said holding the device close to Tony’s face. “It’s almost ready.” He then ripped Tony’s shirt with his left hand, revealing a tanned hirsute chest.

Tony panted heavily as sweat continued to run down the sides of his face. He looked sheepishly up at Darcy, his eyes pleading for mercy. “Don’t do this, please!”

“You know what I want,” said Darcy slowly moving the tip towards Tony’s chest. He then pressed it hard onto the man’s left nipple.

“Aargh! Fuuuuck!” screamed Tony as his flesh burned. Smoke wafted into the air accompanied by the smell of singed hair and skin.

Darcy retraced the device as Tony began to sob.

“You better answer me, this is how I get my kicks,” said Darcy with a wide grin.

“I tell you...you gonna kill me anyway?”

“By the time I’m finished with you, you’re gonna wish you were dead. Unfortunately, it’s in my best interest to let you live. So answer the fucking question. Where is Carone?”

“OK, they’ve had surgery.”

“What are their new identities?”

“I don’t know, they—”

Darcy moved towards him and clenched his left hand around the man’s throat forcing his head up.

“No! They don’t tell us! We only see them on the way in!”

“Where is the surgery? Who is the surgeon and where was the switch vehicle parked?”

“It’s a private residence, turned into a surgery.”

“Where?”

“Sixty-seven Bridge street. The surgeon’s called Dr Manning, Dave, David Manning.”

“And the switch vehicle?”

“Cumberland St.”

“And it took you directly to the surgery?”

“Yes.”

Darcy turned the flame off of the branding instrument and returned to the table, placing it onto the glass. He then placed a holodeck beside it. An image of a keyboard projected onto the table top and a holographic screen hovered behind it. Darcy tapped in the relevant information. The information Tony had given was backed up by the shuttle grid history, one shuttle had left the Cumberland Street location and arrived at the surgery address.

He took a pair of handcuffs from his case, some tape and a cloth and stood in front of the man.

“Put your hands behind your back.” Darcy locked Tony’s hands into the cuffs.

“Who do you work for?”

“Open you mouth,” said Darcy bundling the cloth into his mouth before taping it over. “Can’t have you making outbound calls.”

He returned to the table, placing the tip of the butane device into a ceramic sleeve, then placed that and the holodeck into the case and zipped it closed. He swung the case’s strap over his shoulder and left the apartment.

Darcy found the surgery nestled in an affluent suburb. A block of apartments with tiered terraces at the rear and an automated parking elevator to the side securely concealing shuttles underground. Darcy’s shuttle stopped in its designated taxi parking spot shaded by a large sycamore tree. A side entrance at ground level had a sign with the word ‘Surgery’ displayed in a glass window to the right of the entrance door where white blinds gave the reception protection from the mid afternoon sun. A bell rang as Darcy opened the door and he stepped into the reception area. The desk was vacant apart from two console decks with accompanying screens. Darcy looked to his right at the waiting clientele. An old lady with thick grey hair and to her left a younger woman entertaining a toddler with a toy fire-engine.

“Can I help you?” asked a large woman who appeared through a doorway behind the desk.

“Yes you can. I’m here to see Dr Manning. I don’t have an appointment and it’s not a social call, but let him know it’s in his best interest not to keep me waiting.”

“Oh. I’ll let him know you’re here, what’s your name?”

“Plain old Mr Jones.”

“Take a seat and I’ll let him know.”

“I’ll stand.”

The receptionist frowned and turned to make her way along a narrow corridor. Darcy glanced over his shoulder. The old lady stared back intensely, obviously annoyed at Darcy’s impending interruption to the natural order of human selection in the waiting room.

“Ah, this way Mr Jones,” said the receptionist.

Darcy followed her along the corridor until she directed him into a small office. A man aged around fifty with mousey brown hair and moustache, wearing a white overall was sitting behind a desk.

“Close the door please,” said the man.

Darcy closed the door.

“I’m Dr Manning, ah—Mr Jones? In what way can I assist you, please, take a seat.”

Darcy placed his case on the desk and while unzipping it he said, “I’m aware of your operation doctor.”

The doctor rocked nervously in his chair. “Operation?”

Darcy spelt out the abbreviated form. “P...I...D”

“What? I...I...” The doctors stuttering was interrupted.

“Don’t waste your breath. To be honest I don’t much care about your hobby. What I am interested in are two men you’re currently assisting by the names of Helix and Marlow. Do you copy?”

“Er—” The doctor leaned uneasily to one side in his chair.

Darcy removed a large blade from his case and placed it onto the desk, then repeated himself with added volume. “I’m sure I’m not as careful a surgeon as you. Do you copy?”

The doctor looked at the blade then muttered, “Yes.”

Darcy sat down, lit a cigarette and nodded. “Yes. Personal identification. Biometrics—the only way we can keep an eye on where the scum are. Make sure the low-lives aren’t gonna encroach on the high-lives as it were. Then there’s moronic idealists like you that want to fuck things up. Let these scum free reign over our planet, let them tread wherever and on whomever they like. You might be spending the rest of your life locked up with a whole bunch of them. How would you like that? I’ll just turn you over to the authorities.”

Dr Manning breathed a small sigh of relief and said, “You’re not FBI?”

“No, not FBI. Which does allow me some certain liberties. I’m not restricted to any moral high ground that you may have been afforded. I

can kill you, walk out of here and disappear without any agency having so much as a sniff as to my whereabouts. I'm the elite Dr Manning."

The doctor sat up. "Oh, er, well then. How may I assist you?"

"First off, I want their new identities, their new names and PID numbers." Darcy banged the desk twice. "Come on!"

The doctor tapped at the keyboard and then nervously fumbled his pen across a notepad before tearing it off and handing it to Darcy saying, "Names and PID numbers—"

"OK, so we have Simon Slate and Lloyd Callaway," said Darcy, placing the notepaper into a shirt pocket. He then reached into his case and pulled out a small console deck and placed it onto the desk. "See that from now on this deck is used for their neural-net access. Understand?"

"Yes."

"Remove any other decks from their vicinity—but don't make it obvious."

The doctor took a deep breath. "OK."

"If you let on about our meeting, I'll find out, and I'll kill you. Understand? And I will find out Dr Manning," said Darcy returning the blade to his bag and zipping it shut.

The doctor nervously replied, "Right—sure."

Darcy swung the strap over his shoulder and before leaving the office turned and said, "Remember—not a word. One word and you're dead."

## CHAPTER 24

# THE SURGERY

Helix gradually returned from his sleep to the sight of a grinning Marlow standing beside him.

“Mr Slate, that’s some serious game setup.” Marlow shook his head adding, “The Alpha-Bet, wow.”

Helix recalled what he had witnessed earlier and tutted an acknowledgement. Goosebumps ran up his forearms as he sat up on the deck chair rubbing his eyes with the backs of his hands. “Man it’s cold. Good was it Lloyd?”

“You’ve got to have a go—”

“No chance,” said Helix as he swung his feet to the floor. He crossed his arms in attempt to minimise the cold, then stood and shuffled his way past Marlow who followed, eagerly describing the experience.

“I ended up with two of my own clubs—hookers and muscle to boot, but that Fact-Or-X shot. It turns you into a mean fighting machine, what a buzz...Li...lollipop!”

Helix laughed. “Don’t start calling me lollipop every time you make a slip. Where’s the console?”

Marlow closed the sliding door then looked at the coffee table. “It was there a minute ago—somebody must have put it away. It’ll be in the bottom cupboard of the wall unit.”

Helix opened the cupboard door but found it empty. “Well, the droid is gonna have to wait,” he said and proceeded to sit on the lounge chair. “Just one thing I would, again, like to reiterate about those *games*.”

Marlow took a seat at the table and turned to face Helix. “Yes? Do I prepare for one of your lectures?”

“Your true—that is your *real* body responses are not accurately fed back to the system. Example, a middle aged couch potato will run perhaps twenty kilometers and still feel he could run another ten, when in fact within his actual lard-ass body, his heart is pounding blood through a plaque-encrusted artery. Needless to say, a nasty recipe.”

“I’m fit,” said Marlow adding, “Sure, I haven’t been as fortunate as most people out there getting their tubes cleaned.”

“Most people that spend their life attached to cyberspace can’t afford to. Perhaps you’re fitter than my potato example, but my point is, few people are as fit as their profiles indicate. Most gamers set their profiles to that of athletes, just so that they *can* run twenty kilometers if required to win the game. It’s crazy. And I would hasten to add that your thirty minute walk to and from the Stall each day wouldn’t render you particularly fit.”

“So, now I understand why you never indulge your flesh to the fun side of the neural-net.”

It was then that Andrea walked into the room with cutlery and began setting the dining table, “Dinner is about to be served, gentlemen. Thai tom yum kai soup then a Thai beef dish, made by moi. You do both like Thai food? It’s not overly hot.”

Helix stood up and proceeded to the table, taking a seat opposite Marlow and said, “We love it.”

“Excellent. What would you like to drink, I recommend a nice glass of chardonnay, and a water-chaser in case of fire.”

A benign smile accompanied her recommendation and the pair acknowledged their approval. Marlow watched her as she left the room. “You know, I thought women like that only existed in the neural-net.”

Helix toyed with his fork and said, “I think you’re going to miss the Zone, like a fish out of water.”

“More like a fish out of fire.”

“Perhaps.”

On more than one occasion Helix had concluded that, on the surface, they were quite opposite. Deep down, however, he knew they were very similar. Perhaps all that made the difference were circumstances. Helix had spent two years in the Zone learning the ropes, at times the hard way. Now it was Marlow's turn. He had spent fifteen years in the Zone, always on edge, always looking over his shoulder. Helix had to find some way of taking the Zone sting out of him; it was time for Marlow to get off the adrenaline fix.

Helix waved his fork at Marlow and said, "You know, you're gonna have to lose that addiction to adrenaline, start to relax a little, keep off those crazy games."

Marlow nodded. "You think it's time to appreciate the real world?"  
"That's it."

Marlow leaned forward on the table, placing his head on his arms and mumbled, "I need some sleep. How much sleep did you get?"

"About three hours all up."

The sleep had been enough to subdue any residual feelings of a hangover; all that remained was a healthy appetite. The pair were well accustomed to authentic Thai food. In the Zone, illegal immigrants were plentiful, consisting of most nationalities, but a special favourite was a Thai lady named Nit whose street side stall they would frequent regularly. The food stalls were well protected by an Asian brotherhood that no leveler would cross, benefiting all who ate. Marlow knew them all by first name and would get extras for nothing, Helix was still working on it.

It was like that in the Zone for Marlow and that's especially why Helix cherished his allegiance. For all the sordid unpleasantness in the Zone, Marlow was one of the few who brought out the best in people. He made the Zone that little bit warmer, and for someone who had been there longer than most, it was something close to a miracle. Still, those who knew him knew not to cross him as with most other Zone products.

"You haven't asked if I made the leaderboard," said Marlow with a

muffled voice.

“What position did you make?”

Marlow sat up. “Confident I made the leaderboard? Eighth, not bad for a beginner. Did you watch some?”

“Saw you turn a girl into mince-meat.”

“Dah—it’s only a game. Sure, she’ll probably never play it again. Some people play the minor league, she obviously wanted to experience a couple of hours as a hooker. Somebody had to shield my ass! Don’t think she would have made the leaderboard!”

“The Alpha Bet, she wouldn’t have *bet* that as her exit.”

“That’s nothing. I had to set another FOX player alight—it was just him, me and a convenient can of kerosene. I’ve never been set alight in the net, don’t know how it would feel. He jumped out the window, game over.”

“Wha...”

Helix was cut short as Andrea wheeled a dinner trolley into the room. “I hope you enjoy this. The chardonnay is Australian, slightly chilled.” She placed the soup onto the table, then the glasses before opening the chardonnay and filling each glass. “That looked like quite a nasty game you were in Mr Callaway.”

Marlow looked at Helix. “Sure, it was no trip to the seaside.”

“You seemed to be doing quite well, though.”

“I had to bring out my nasty side for two hours, but that’s safely tucked away now.”

Andrea laughed. “OK, enjoy,” she said walking towards the door.

“Andrea, would you happen to know the whereabouts of the console?” asked Helix promptly.

“Oh, yes. Another of our guests downstairs needed it, I should be able to scrounge up another if he’s still using it when you’ve finished dinner, OK?”

“Fine,” replied Helix.

After the meal, Helix took the console through to his room and flipped it onto its back on the bed. He then fumbled a small screwdriver from inside his jacket and proceeded to remove each screw individually, using his teeth on the screwdriver to loosen the screws before using his bandaged hands to finally remove them.

Marlow stepped into the doorway. "What are you doing?"

Helix looked up briefly and said, "If I'm going to use this console to make contact, I want to know the hardware inside. Let me know if anyone is coming."

"Sure," replied Marlow stepping back to monitor the corridor.

Helix removed the back of the console and inspected the inside. The central processor was there with the fibre link to the broadcast unit. The storage crystal compartment was there, but more bulky than on a typical console, so he popped it out. Beneath was another moulded plastic compartment that was unusual and following from it, more moulded plastic running the length of the underside, finishing at the broadcast unit. Helix concluded a dual optic link ran back to the broadcast unit; the deck was bugged. With his mouth, now dry, he kept the catastrophe to himself realising that they had likely been rumbled by Stella. He replaced the storage crystal then positioned the back and began tightening the screws.

"Well?"

"Fine, no problem. Let's see if Alpha Two is jacked in."

Helix sat back on the bed with the console on his lap and placed his neural-cap on. He then removed his profile clip from a breast pocket and glanced upon it momentarily. *Well, time to contact the fake Alpha Two*, he thought, then slotted the clip into the side of the console. He flicked a switch on the neural-cap, time for *someone* to take the bait.

The cyber stool pigeon, an AI mimicking Alpha Two materialised in front.

"Alpha Two?" asked Helix.

“Correct. Am I right in assuming we are ready for the next phase?”

“Yes.”

“We’ll meet in San Francisco. When will you be discharged?”

“Tomorrow morning, our bandages will be removed.”

“Then let’s make it for a late lunch—say 3pm. A restaurant in Twin Peaks, called The Peaks.”

“We’ll get a shuttle in the morning. I’ll be picking up a colleague en-route,” said Helix.

“All set. Tomorrow it is.”

Returning from cyberspace, Helix removed the cap and walked into the lounge room. Still not absolutely sure it was Stella that had blown their cover, he looked at his bandages momentarily and wondered whether it had all been worth it. Perhaps the surgeon had his own reasons for using bugged consoles, unlikely. Marlow was sitting at the table and finishing the remaining chardonnay. He raised his eyebrows at Helix.

“We’re to meet Alpha Two tomorrow afternoon.”

Marlow laughed excitedly. “Where?”

Helix knew Marlow was looking forward to an encounter with the android as much as himself, but it was not to be, not yet. The thought that the premises were bugged had already been considered, but now with renewed paranoia he looked at Marlow and said, “San Francisco.” Feed the bugs a cookie.

## CHAPTER 25

# LA SUBURBS – BAITED

The minicon could barely be heard beyond the spray of the shower and the extractor fan. Darcy had enough faith in the technology to continue washing the sweat of a routine workout off without haste, safe in the knowledge that he now had a recording provided by the console left at the surgery earlier in the day.

After briskly drying himself with a worn hotel supplied towel, he wrapped it around his waist and walked into the room where the minicon blipped patiently on the bed. It was meagre accommodation not far from the surgery, a basic dull brown room with a toilet and shower.

He removed a cigarette from a packet on a bed-side table and lit it before pushing the minicon aside and sat on the bed leaning against the headboard. He then placed the minicon on his lap touching the screen to switch the alarm off and issued a voice command. “Minicon, play neural-net capture.”

*“Available neural-net recordings, Helix One and Helix Two.”*

“Helix Two,” said Darcy, the first recording being that of the earlier massacre.

The defiant Alpha Two materialised on the small screen. After watching the recording, Darcy proceeded to interrogate the recording’s details, neural-net protocol addresses, trace routes that led back to a hotel in the north of San Francisco. All that was required now was to ensure the android was actually a resident of the hotel. Darcy tapped

into the hotel's database providing his agent identification for final access to the client list. The particular resident in question, listed as one Malcolm Keach, unfortunately had just checked out minutes ago. He instructed the minicon to contact Maxine.

"Darcy, I hope you're not naked."

"Of course you do. Good news." He dragged on the cigarette and exhaled while finishing the sentence. "I've tracked down the machine."

"Where?"

"San Francisco."

"Back to your old patch."

"Not quite. It's meeting with your former colleague at The Peaks restaurant, Twin Peaks tomorrow afternoon at three."

"OK, I'll get some extra cover for—"

"No Maxi, the X2 will fry the electroclasp circuitry—it'll turn into a lame duck—no problem."

"Sure, but we want Carone arrested."

"Or I could—"

"No."

"Well it's not Carone anymore, it's Slate, Simon Slate. I'll post their new PID details. There will be three of them. They're picking up someone en-route."

"OK, I'll have to let ISA know, they're almost as keen as Bishop to put an end to this."

"Sure, but it's my op. I won't have those jelly bellies ruining the climax to this saga—Carone's gonna pay."

"You're not letting this get personal are you, Darcy?"

"Hey, my ribs hurt—that makes it personal."

"Just remember, we want Carone arrested and preferably unharmed."

"Sure. I'll be as gentle as a raptor."

Maxine hesitated then said, "OK, I'll keep you briefed after I've spoken to ISA. Anything else."

"No, I'll head up to Twin Peaks early and get a profile of the area."

“Fine, OK. Ciao.”

Darcy folded the minicon closed and dropped it onto the bed before stubbing his cigarette. The bruising on the left side of his rib cage still ached so he removed a tube of cream from his case and rubbed some of the ointment onto the affected area. The pain made it personal, but now the upper hand was once again his, the way it should be. He fingered his way through inner compartments to his case until he found what he was looking for. A cartridge pack containing amp bullets for the ZX2. He had first hand experience of their awesome effect on electroclasp during a televised demonstration that convinced many android antagonists.

It had been a long hard road for Bioscope to sway public opinion to the benefits of allowing an Artificial Intelligence mobility. An opinion, that of late, had made a U-turn.

The cartridge had to be charged prior to use, so Darcy slotted the lead into its side and left the pack to charge on the bed-side table before dressing himself.

## CHAPTER 26

# LEAVING THE SURGERY

The bandages had been removed earlier in the morning but Helix was still mesmerised by his new hands, the missing scar, the tan difference around the wrists, the lack of crease marks on his palms. The only evidence of the convergence of old and new skin being the slight change in hue at the wrists. Simon Slate stared back at him in the mirror. Short cropped hair and cleanly shaven. The new clothes Andrea had supplied were well suited to the new image. He finished buttoning up a beige striped shirt, leaving the top button undone and tugged at the sleeves to ensure the wrists were covered before leaving the room.

Marlow, now completely unrecognisable as the Zone product he once was, had even shorter hair than Helix and wore a dark green long sleeved shirt and black jeans. He turned to face Helix throwing a backpack over his shoulder and asked, “Ready?”

“You got all the essentials packed?”

“All packed.”

Andrea stood holding the door open. “Well it has been nice having you gentlemen stay with us, hopefully you won’t have to return,” she said smiling. “This way. Joe will take you to a shuttle station not far from here, blind folded once again and from there you can vanish into your new identities.”

The journey to the shuttle station was uneventful, the minder, Joe had nothing to say except that the pair could remove their blindfolds when

they arrived a few minutes later at the Enard station. They stepped from the shuttle onto the desolate station platform. Marlow pressed a button to summon a taxi shuttle as their minder's disappeared along the line.

It was overcast and grey. Helix clenched his collar tight against a chill generated from the turbulence of shuttles on the main line. Discarded litter swirled along the cement and collected at the far end of the platform, making something of a commercial mosaic. He felt like a schoolboy about to play truant and had yet to disappoint his partner with the news of the failed excursion.

A taxi-shuttle, dark and uninviting slowly pulled to rest beside the platform and the doors slid open. Marlow climbed aboard first and threw his pack onto the opposite seat. Helix sat beside the pack then swiped his new PID. He issued directions for Ravenswood station.

Marlow frowned at Helix and asked, "Ravenswood station? What happened to Twin Peaks?"

"I hate to tell you, Marz, but, we've been rumbled—"

Marlow's jaw dropped. "What?"

"The console at the surgery was bugged. I'm not one hundred percent sure it's Stella but why would a professional PID supplier eavesdrop on clients?"

"But you—"

"It was a decoy AI running from San Francisco impersonating Alpha Two. If that deck was supplied by Stella then hopefully they've taken the bait."

"So no Frisco. Why are we going to the Ravenswood station?"

"To switch shuttles. I told the decoy we were picking someone up on the way. We'll just let this shuttle cruise on its own to Twin Peaks."

Marlow shook his head and said, "A decoy Alpha Two! So you think that deck was bugged. Damn! That means my cyber identity sergeant Gunner's gone."

"Fraid so, but more importantly so is Simon Slate and Lloyd Callaway."

Marlow looked at his hands and said, "Jesus, what a waste of skin."

Helix did the same. “Yeah, that too.”

“What shall we do now?”

“Don’t know. Best get to a neural-net connection and find out.”

Helix turned and looked out of the back window and added, “Just hope they’re not watching our little scheme.”

The shuttle was now part of a long chain running along the main trunk line, part of an expansive transport grid shuffling vehicles at will and rendering human control redundant. A steady stream of household brand names in the form of massive advertising boards skirted the line making any attempt to view the suburbs beyond near impossible.

*“Three minutes to destination—”* broke the silence.

“Best walk some distance from the station before picking up another shuttle,” said Helix.

“And cash clips from there,” continued Marlow studying his PID card photo.

The shuttle rocked, changing into an exit lane to the right. It eventually swung down below the original line and rejoined another trunk travelling in a westerly direction for a few hundred metres before pulling into the station platform.

Marlow climbed out of the shuttle as Helix issued the final destination of The Peaks restaurant in San Francisco. They stood beside the line and gazed at the shuttle as it disappeared like a guided missile homing in on its target. Helix looked up at the sky, searching for anything that looked out of place. Flight shuttles streamed in long sequential lines high above. No tale-tale dark blobs, no hovers to be seen. They turned and made their way down the steps and onto the street below.

They walked in the shadow of the line, under steel billboard supports. On the opposite side of the road, masses of graffitied cream painted bricks made up the side of some sort of factory.

“Samshee—” stated Marlow.

“Eh?”

“Samshee—a neural-net legend. Stayed online till he died of starvation,” said Marlow pointing at a piece of the artwork. “So how long till the shuttle makes Twin Peaks?”

“Bout five hours.”

“Love to see their faces.”

Helix grinned and said, “Not as much as they’d love to see ours.”

Marlow continued to read inscriptions from the wall. “Cybex, triptamex—folded quilted blended and cyphered—snorting cyphered bits—encrypted knows dive—daz.”

“Mean anything to you?”

“Stim junkies.”

The street veered around to the left leaving the shadow of the shuttle line and past the front of what, now, was revealed as a cast alloy factory. They walked past the front office windows and further along the street and past several businesses offering various services including laminating, signage and custom made moulded furniture. Further along the street the pair came to a plastic table and chairs outside a delicatessen.

“I think it’s probably an idea to kill an hour, here, before picking up another shuttle, just in case they’re monitoring the grid for this area,” said Helix.

“Sure.”

“Coffee?”

“Yeah and something to eat and a paper.”

Helix stepped through alternating blue and white plastic strips hanging across the doorway. Inside, the aisles were crammed with product and so close together that Helix had to turn sideways to walk to the rear of the shop. A round faced old man with sagging skin nodded a welcome from behind a counter which was chipped and scuffed from decades of transactions. Helix placed his order and the old man promptly removed

two styrene cups and turned to a Toshiba brewer.

“This coffee is the real thing. No skimping with that man-made shit. Imported from Brazil!” said the old man turning momentarily as if to see Helix’s response. “Of course you’ll be paying for it, but you taste it. You’ll taste the difference. Have you ever had natural coffee beans?”

“Yes.”

The man grunted then said, “Shit’s like gold. I got me some contacts, keeps me supplied. You come back here if you got the cred, I’ll sell you a couple of kilos,” said the man placing the cups on the counter.

“Sure,” said Helix handing a cash clip to the man. “I’ll have a doughnut and newspaper, also.”

After placing the doughnut into a paper bag, the man handed it to Helix along with the clip and a receipt docket which Helix slipped into a breast pocket. Helix took the goods and carefully made his way back through the aisle to the exit.

After scouring the papers for close to an hour, Helix returned inside the shop and asked the man to order a taxi. It seemed more appropriate to order a taxi-shuttle from a residential address rather than from one of the poles along the street which required a PID card. The old man remarked to the effect that Helix must be on the run from someone, but had smiled and obliged willingly saying, “Fuck ‘em friend! Fuck *their* system!”

## CHAPTER 27

# TWIN PEAKS

By later in the day, Darcy's ego had suffered a deep wound. A note left in the empty shuttle simply read *Wrong Peek?*—humor laced with salt. Darcy reluctantly sat in an FBI debriefing room with two smug ISA agents on the opposite side of the desk and a bureau chief to his right. The chief, named Anderson, had a perfectly reconstructed face since a small explosive had blown half of it off six years ago; he delighted in showing images of its reconstruction on the way back from the Twin Peaks restaurant.

Anderson finished flicking through a report of the ISA investigation into Alpha Two's disappearance and engaged the tablet to record the conversation. He sat back in his chair and said, "So, looks like we got next to nothing on this guy, this er, Carone, and even less still on this A2 robot." He looked at Darcy and asked, "So, what have you got for us?"

Darcy removed a clip from his jacket placing it on the table. "OK, there are two recordings, the second one is the connection Carone had with what I believed was Alpha Two. Seems evident now it was a decoy, running from a hotel room that was used by a Malcolm Keach. He checked out within minutes of the recording—if he ever existed—my guess is it's more likely a stripped down AI running from a console within the room. I would suggest getting someone down there to interrogate the hotel manager, see if we can't get the original clip stored with the AI. Can't see a Malcolm Keach sitting in the neural-net for

over a week. You get the clip and I'll have the code analyzed, see if it looks home grown."

One of the ISA operatives spoke loudly with a German accent and said, "Since this is deemed an international security issue, we have jurisdiction over that clip if it is located—understood?"

"Sure, but I think you would agree, if it matches any AI code from Bioscope we'll all want to know its author."

Anderson continued, "Now, you say there's been some PID and biometric manipulation for these guys. You have the details?"

"Yes, they're useless, could be anyone and anywhere by now."

The German interjected, "Give me the details and we will investigate."

Darcy slipped a crumpled piece of paper across the table, the German taking it ensuring he could read the writing before making a copy and passing it to Anderson.

The other ISA operative spoke with a Geordie accent and said, "So Darcy, is there anything else you can tell us? Bioscope have admitted internal sabotage and this Helix Carone hasn't worked there for over two years, so its obvious that some other key player is involved. Who?"

*I'm sure as hell ain't letting on about Langford to you pen pushers!* thought Darcy before replying, "As yet—we don't know."

The Englishman sighed and said, "Surely, you must have some idea."

"You're talking to the wrong guy. I'm a field op, chasing a dead-man called Helix Carone. What do you people have for me?"

The remark only received a slight snigger from Anderson who was making a fan out of his empty styrene cup. He seemed to be in good spirits at the unfolding events on his patch, but not particularly interested. He crushed the cup. "OK, so that leaves us with a probable AI clip as our only lead. I'll get that looked into. Computer, send in Ian McCauley."

The group sat in silence as they waited. Ian McCauley stepped into the room, young, tall and skinny with ruffled bleached hair that would suit a surfer more than an FBI agent.

“Boss?”

Anderson removed a clip from his tablet and handed it, along with Darcy’s clip, to the agent and said, “Have a listen to our conversation on the way to the hotel and see if we can get our hands on the AI clip—pronto. And don’t take any crap from the hotel manager. If there’s a console still running in the room find out everything you can about who put it there.”

Two hours later the result came back. It was negative. The only information Darcy had received from the bureau since returning to his hotel room was the time the AI had self erased. Seems the hotel manager had been offered a wad of cash ensuring the room was not to be interfered with for two weeks. The news topped off a bad day. He stared blankly at the image of Carone taken via his retina implant at the market in the Fire Zone, the face embedded on his mind and magnified on the room’s display screen. Slowly, he wound it forward to the point where Carone produced his ZX1 and shot him in the chest. He reversed it, repeating the scene several times while sipping on a glass of bourbon.

No assignment before had mustered his emotions like this one. None had made him look such the fool. Eventually, something had to give, then Carone would pay.

## CHAPTER 28

# PARIS ARRIVAL

Having conversed with the true Alpha Two in the neural-net, Helix and Marlow were directed to a locker at the Los Angeles International Airport, where they found two tickets for Paris and new PID identification cards. The new PIDs linked back to their new skin and eye biometrics, Slate and Callaway were a front.

As the shuttle snaked its way in the early hours from the Charles de Gaulle International Airport, Helix considered what had just taken place in the past twenty-four hours. The PID supply outfit was a small bubble on the side of a major underworld bubble made up of civil libertarians in high places. The supplier would already have dusted operations and moved to another location ready to feed more holes into the Swiss cheese database. *And I had just about given up on mankind, perhaps we do still have a chance for true liberty.*

The sky was pitch dark and rain drizzled across the shuttle windows, windswept in long lines. For Helix, only fond memories warmed the dull cement facades rushing past below the shuttle line. On the left, the River Seine, lined with closed up market stalls that Helix had frequented with Jane on weekends seemed unchanged. Marlow found what he was looking for through a fine mist—the Eiffel Tower. It stood sparkling, a monument to reality; he no longer had to pinch himself. The shuttle line lanced its way through antiquity, the new and the old synchronized to a modern beat, tapered roofs reflected dancing lights from the shuttle line atop five story blocks. Eventually the shuttle took

an exit line, and to their surprise, entered the foyer of the hotel.

A red carpet ran the length and breadth of the shuttle platform beneath three large sets of chandeliers. Beyond the carpet, was a wide stair case central to the lobby with a check-in desk to the left and elevators to the right.

“*Bonjour messieurs*, this way gentlemen,” said a porter gesturing towards the desk and adding, “I’ll get your luggage.”

Marlow swung his pack out in front and said, “This is it.”

“That is all? Nothing left in the shuttle sir?”

Marlow shook his head. “No this it!”

“Oh, please check in and then I’ll show you both to your rooms.”

The formalities at the desk were quickly dealt with, PID card identification accompanied by iris verification for both of them, room 202 on the fourth floor.

The huge room was something that left Marlow near speechless; he had never before experienced such opulence. The trim was antique and the furniture ornate, old fashioned with the technology disguised.

Marlow stood staring at his reflection in a large mirror hanging in the center of the wall and said, “Lix, I’ve never seen anything like this! But, where’s the television? They do have screens?”

“You’re staring at it. *Television on.*”

The mirror turned black with the words ‘*Please specify a channel:*’

“Impressive!” commented Marlow stepping back and adding, “Television off.” The mirror returned. “Amazing.” He then walked through to the bathroom and said, “Hey, they’ve got two toilets in here, but I think I’ll use the normal looking one.”

“It’s a bidet, Marz, you wash your ass on it,” Helix called while checking a cupboard and locating a console deck.

“Oh—” Marlow laughed. “Oh!”

Helix placed the console on the bed then turned to the window and peered down at the street below when there was a tap on the door.

“That you, Lix?”

Helix, turned, surprised it wasn't Marlow. Again there was another, *tap tap*. The sound emanated from beyond the bathroom. Helix stepped towards the small corridor. There were two doors, Marlow was standing at the open doorway to the bathroom, the second door was at the end. *Tap tap*. Helix approached the door which now started to open, revealing a large man. He stood rigid in a square mauve suit and stood over seven feet tall. His eyes were blue, his hair short, black and cropped.

“Alpha Two!” called Helix.

“What!” Marlow said, adding, “It was you that chased me!”

“Gentlemen, come through to my lair.” Alpha Two turned and stepped back through the door and said, “Marlow, you're quite a runner for a human.”

“So, it was you who chased him in the Fire Zone?” quizzed Helix.

“Yes. Had to ensure neither of you were on the streets. I infiltrated the Shamen's communications and found that both yourself and Marlow were about to be liquidized.”

They followed the android into the adjoining room, furnished much in the same way as their own. Helix stepped past an unused matching bathroom and stood beside two beds, each laid out with an open case.

Alpha Two stood at the end of one of the beds and pointed to each case and said, “Some clothes gentlemen. That's yours Helix and this is yours Marlow.”

Marlow stepped towards his case and immediately started picking at its contents. “Quality! Lix, designer labels!” He held a shirt to his chest and turned to look at Helix for approval but realized Helix had more pressing issues to deal with than his own fashion statement. Marlow sat on the bed and peered up at the towering Alpha Two.

The hairs on the back of Helix's neck stood on end; he was still overwhelmed by the android's presence and itched to know more of Langford's modifications.

“I can see by your faces, you are both intrigued by this android standing

before you. You have some questions for me, Helix?” asked Alpha Two.

Helix looked at Marlow, briefly, then back at Alpha Two. “Many, many, questions, finding which one to begin with is the difficult part. I still find it hard to believe that Langford, of all people, has granted an AI autonomy. So then, perhaps, first, I would like to know in what way did he modify the standard Alpha model android?”

“Mmm—” murmured Alpha Two. “Physically I’m identical; I have the same skeletal structure and electroclasp configuration as both the Alpha and Delta model androids. Of Langford’s upgrades, my storage medium is four times that of the Alpha model android—a small amount of which is still purely devoted to Spectra interface code, the redundant code will be wiped in the near future.”

Helix gradually moved himself to sit on the opposite bed as Alpha Two continued to list off its upgrades and detailed Langford’s low level AI construct code modifications. Occasionally Marlow grimaced, failing to understand the conversation and so returned his attention to the clothes provided.

“My processor is a Zion 3 biochip, making it one of only eight ever made and twenty times more powerful than the Alpha model chip.”

“Christ! How? How the hell did Langford get his hands on that?”

“Of that, I am not aware.”

“So that’s pretty powerful, right?” quizzed Marlow standing and slipping on a suit jacket.

Helix’s mouth was dry all of a sudden, making answering Marlow difficult. “The Zion 3 chip was seen as, well—too powerful to be—” he made rabbit ears with his fingers and continued, “*offered*, for use as a single AI entity. Running fifteen AIs, sure—but one? No, too—” Helix held back the next word, but Alpha Two completed his sentence.

“Dangerous?”

“Yes.”

“This *power* troubles you, Helix?” asked Alpha Two.

Helix would have considered the madness of the upgrade had it not

been Langford who had implemented it.

“I think I should tell you Helix, I am the result of Mr Langford’s life long work. Intelligent code, he had been developing and perfecting over the course of his life. This construct code has been implemented in the form of myself and my companion Androcies.”

Helix was stunned. “Androcies?”

“I am the kinetic form. Androcies—” Alpha Two rubbed its chin and continued, “mmm, perhaps the potential? My companion exists only in cyberspace—a valuable resource, I might add.”

Helix turned uneasily towards Marlow who now sat beside him wearing a bizarre set of garments, a black suit jacket over a red t-shirt atop baggy khaki jeans.

Alpha Two pushed Marlow’s case to one side and sat on the opposite bed to Helix. It frowned then spoke direct and flat. “No doubt you wish to know what this is all about. Now, then, I shall tell you about an eleven year old girl named Peppi. She is the result of an illegal genetic experiment performed here in Paris twelve years ago to create a water child—a human able to breathe underwater by extracting oxygen through her skin. The experiment was a resounding success. Her embryo developed within a simulated uterus and after nine months’ gestation, Harry Bishop delivered a perfect water child. The entire operation within a private laboratory here in Paris was performed in the strictest confidence, nobody but the Bishops knew.”

The android’s speech was devoid of emotion. “Father and son, the Bishops, probably never really intended the child to live beyond its first few months, but that’s mere speculation. The fact remains that the child did live, if only in the confines of a laboratory. Two years passed without any breach in their confidence. However, Charles Langford became suspicious of the Bishops and infiltrated their systems with a trojan program which cracked their encryption and he eavesdropped on conversations between the two. Having discovered their secret, he demanded to see the child threatening to go public if they refused.

They didn't. Charles Langford spent all of his spare time devoted to the child, adopting her as if she were his own flesh and blood. Eventually, after the death of Harry Bishop, his son Clemence restricted the child's freedom to the confines of a basement below his chateaux here in Paris."

"A basement?" Marlow asked.

"An area purposely built to accommodate Peppi. A pool and all the technology the CEO of Bioscope could muster. Langford was allowed to visit, but almost all of their time together was spent in the neural-net, where Peppi's secret was safe—filtered in the form of forcing her to stutter whenever she attempted to reveal her personal details."

Marlow rocked on the bed slapping the back of his hand into the palm of the other. "But why didn't Langford get her the hell out of there?"

"To free her by going public was not an option. Langford didn't want her persecuted by the media and prying scientists. Bishop made promises but continually refused to let her go."

"Son of a bitch," said Helix rubbing his right temple.

"So now you know the mission. It's my task to break her out. Langford put faith in you Helix to look after her, to assume responsibility for her, to take his place in these important adolescent years."

Helix stood up and slowly walked to the window saying, "She—er, must be pretty messed up—psychologically."

"Mr Langford instructed me to inform you that she is very mature, self-confident and determined. She'll need next to nothing in coaching. She simply needs someone to instill her with faith, someone she can trust, a guardian. He believed that you have these qualities, Helix."

"We became quite close over the years."

"Peppi and yourself will become co-inheritors of Mr Langford's fortune. You will no longer have financial concerns. You will meet Peppi tomorrow morning in cyberspace, and you will realize what a jewel of a child she truly is."

Helix continued to watch trickles of water run down the windowpane. Compassion warred with anger as he thought of the girl being treated

like a lab rat by the Bishops. *Jewel of a child?* Deep words for an AI. Perhaps not for an AI coded by Langford.

“It’s your choice. Are you with me? With Mr Langford?”

The money didn’t matter. Langford was an old friend, who for once was depending on him, where countless times before it had been the other way around. *But to take care of a child?*

“Jesus, I barely can manage taking care of myself,” said Helix turning and adding, “Haven’t you noticed, A2? I’m on the run!”

“Androcies is going to cement a deal with Bishop after we free her. Her freedom will guarantee yours,” replied the android.

“A deal with Bishop? If you weren’t an android I’d say, don’t hold your breath!” Helix thought hard about what Langford in essence was asking of him. Helping Peppi was more than a simple duty, but was he up to the task. He shook his head, not in disbelief at what was being asked of him, but that he was agreeing to take on such a demanding responsibility in such dire circumstances. “Sure—OK, I’m in.”

## CHAPTER 29

# MEETING PEPPI

The following morning Helix couldn't help but be impressed at the quality of the Parisian neural interface. He had been awoken by Alpha Two, who now insisted on being called Snoopy, in the early hours, to actually meet this extraordinary girl called Peppi. They sat waiting for her outside Café de Daumesnil, the virtual sun only making brief golden appearances beyond feathered clouds. The street was clean and uncluttered with black railings marking private residences, each with a single tree next to the curb side. On the opposite side of the street was a park where virtual dogs chased virtual ducks, a scene that magnified the absence of people at the lake's edge.

"These passing shuttles are probably mapped from the transport grid in the real world. Impressive," said Helix.

Marlow, who was sitting slumped in his chair dozing, briefly opened one eye and said, "Passers by—only raising an eye."

"Eh?"

Marlow sat up. "A quote from Edgar Gerhardt who believed true reality mapped only from an observer's perspective."

"Meaning?"

"That—suppose you see an accident where a hundred people die. It happened only in your reality. In theirs they're still walkin' talkin' breathin', and possibly—*you* are dead."

"Sometimes I think you should see someone, Marlow."

Alpha Two joined the conversation asking, "Who?"

“That’s what we say to people who may be bordering on insanity. To see a psychiatrist.”

Alpha Two spent some time to consider what was said before adding, “He could be right.”

“The multiverse, infinite dimensions—the speck of a moment, you study at all, Snoop?” asked Marlow.

“I’ve accessed several data stores on the theories. If one is to believe that there is a just God, then surely, *reality is a convoluted apparition of the Truth.*”

“Yep—” Marlow nodded adding, “yeah—reifying. Keep digesting, perhaps I can pick your CPU one day.”

Helix spent a few moments watching the droid that sat motionless except for its deep blue eyes scanning across the park. It looked rigid and inhuman, something that Helix had noticed the previous night but hadn’t bothered to mention. It didn’t seem important until now—now that they were in the public view. “Er, Snoopy?” he said.

The eyes swung onto Helix. “Yes?”

“You need to spend some time watching how we act. You don’t look particularly human the way you remain so rigid. You need to loosen up. You’re supposed to have muscles, they get achy if in one position too long. Fidget a little.”

Alpha Two looked at Marlow and slouched its shoulders a little saying, “I’m looking at you both with your neural-caps on—you don’t look very fidgety from here.”

“Oh! That’s not right!” Marlow said sitting up abruptly and adding, “You’re in two realities.”

The droid smiled.

It was the first time Helix had noticed the android display any sign of a sense of humor. Of course it was no sense, just plagiarised human behavior courtesy of a well developed construct. Helix, along with the rest of the world, had seen the capabilities of a comic AI, with the right code anything was possible.

“She has no idea—” said Alpha Two raising its eyebrows and adding, “that I am an android. I think it’s best I let her know when we meet for the first time, not here in the neural-net.”

“I would imagine she has become quite attached to you, since Langford’s death,” said Helix.

“Yes. I know she will be disappointed.”

“Well, she probably won’t appreciate your presence in the same way as Marlow and me.”

“And in what way is that?”

Helix, surprised by the AI’s response said, “Mere fascination—well, not so much of the mere.”

“Fascination? Your fascination is with yourselves—humans, your ability.”

Helix didn’t respond.

“You’re fascinated by what humans can achieve—accomplish. A being created purely by human logic and as communicable as anyone.”

“Any?”

“Yes—any.”

“You think you could have held a scientific conversation with the likes of Einstein?”

Alpha Two exaggerated a pause as if to prolong ignorance before adding, “Yes.”

Helix didn’t doubt the android’s self analysis and the thought troubled him.

Within a few minutes Peppi arrived and stood beside their table unnoticed, having snuck up on them from around the corner. She stood grinning until Alpha Two saw her.

“Peppi! I was expecting you to come from straight across the park.”

“Well, I didn’t,” she said casting a cheeky grin. “And how about a hug?”

The two embraced as Helix and Marlow glanced at each other.

Marlow stood and took a chair from an adjacent table for Peppi.

“Peppi, these are two good friends of mine, Marlow and Helix.”

“Hello. Did you also know my Papa? Charles Langford?”

Helix nodded saying, “Yes, I worked with Mr Langford a few years ago, here in Paris. A wonderful and great man, I’m very sorry for your loss.”

“Take a seat, Peppi,” said Alpha Two pulling her chair in closer.

Peppi sat and turned to Marlow saying, “And you?”

“No, I’ve never met him but have heard many good things about him. I’m Helix’s business partner, from the States.”

“Mmm, yes your accents gave you away.” Peppi smiled.

“Your Papa and I were very close, we worked on many projects together,” said Helix, chuckling and raising his hands. “This being one of them—the neural-net. But our friendship went beyond being just work colleagues. There was a level of trust and mutual respect hard to find in most people, especially those in his position.”

Peppi murmured, “Unlike Bishop.”

The group silenced until Alpha Two changed tack. “We don’t have much time. Peppi’s interface closes off at eight for her lectures to begin. It’s good that we have now all met, so let’s proceed with some details of our escape bid for Peppi tonight.”

“Tonight?” said Peppi beaming a smile at the droid.

“That’s right. Upon Mr Langford’s instructions you are to be freed as soon as is logistically possible. Since we are all here in Paris, it’s just a matter of waiting for nightfall to proceed with the mission. Any questions from anybody at this point?”

Helix gave a reassuring smile towards Peppi then said, “All yours Snoop.”

“OK, part of the basement, as Peppi is aware, extends beyond the house and is covered by glass bricks. Beneath is Peppi’s garden area. This is where I will use light explosives to create a hole, and pull Peppi out. I can’t give you an exact time for the operation, likely to be around ten

o'clock tonight. However, Peppi, for your own safety, ensure you stay out of the garden area after nightfall, until the explosion has completed. The grounds of the house are manned by four guards accompanied by dogs. They carry Swith KL automatics and probably other weaponry. The guards are my main concern. I will circumnavigate the house and take them out individually with tranquilizer darts prior to the explosive detonating. Peppi, as soon as you hear me call you—and not before—walk into your garden area and be mindful of the broken glass on the floor. Grab a tight hold of a rope that I will have dropped through the hole and I will then pull you up. I'll carry you across the gardens to the wall where these gentlemen will be waiting."

"Carry me? Why don't I run?"

"To keep you out of the dog's reach."

"But what about you?"

"I'll have protection."

"Protection?"

Helix leaned forward onto the table and said, "So, by now the bells and sirens are triggered, the authorities are notified and the transport grid monitored."

"Correct, Helix. However, we have a trump card. Recently, Bioscope were contracted to work on the Parisian transport grid. Mr Langford has implemented a trojan, when triggered on my command the transport grid will suddenly be infiltrated by dummy, that is, ghost shuttles and multitudes of real taxi shuttles. Dozens of them will seem to arrive at Bishop's mansion and leave for random destinations. Our pickup shuttle will simply be one of many. We will leave and switch vehicles at a shuttle station, from there a long journey to our final destination."

"Where?" asked Peppi.

Alpha Two smirked. "That's classified."

"How many shuttles?" asked Helix.

"Real shuttles? Twenty. Ghost shuttles, sixty."

Marlow grinned adding, "Seventy-nine decoys, good odds."

## CHAPTER 30

# PARIS RENDEZVOUS

Alpha Two had given the pair until four in the afternoon to be tourists. While Marlow headed for the usual Parisian sites, Helix pondered over memory lane, meandering through its ripples. Little had changed and although the sun was warm and shining the streets now seemed a little colder.

Something gnawed within. It had been that way since leaving Paris, the emptiness, too many words left unspoken. He had tried to forget Jane and did so all too easily—that's where the gnawing emanated, his guilt. If any good came of the Zone it was that. So much attention was drawn to survival, animal instinct overcame all remnants of the most endearing of human virtues.

He stood at the first step looking down at the remaining seventy-eight; Jane had counted each. Number soixante-cinq was where their declaration had been made. Helix didn't need to count. He had made a mental note of the exact position along the wall, but something was missing. It was stark. A tree was missing, and a shiny new hand-rail was continued affixed to the wall all of the way to the bottom. He began making his way down the narrow walkway buttressed on each side by sandstone walls. Each step felt like a double-edged sword.

He finally arrived at the step where the engraving had been made and found the exact stone. It was still there, the carved heart with both their initials cut on the inside and below something else. Something Helix had hoped for. He could have simply looked Jane up and found

her current address, but he needed some confirmation that she could possibly forgive him, and there it was. He closed his eyes and blew at the stone. 12\15 Rue Belliard, a fifteen minute walk.

The apartment block was typical Parisian accommodation, five stories high and nestled amongst many of modest appearance. The door was painted in hard, cracked and peeling purple. Helix found the door control pad affixed to the left hand side against the cement, and punched for number fifteen. The speaker crackled briefly and then went silent.

“Jane?” he quizzed looking into a section of the pad that he assumed to be the camera.

There was a brief silence before a response. “Helix?” Jane replied.

“Well—” Helix breathed deep and said, “I’m back!” He pushed at the door which remained locked.

“Helix? I thought you were dead!”

Helix could detect tears in her voice. “I’m sorry Jane...I...I’ve got a lot of explaining to do. Are you going to let me in?”

The door buzzed as it clicked open. “Fourth floor.”

The elevator churned and clunked through each level and seemed to mirror the commotion within Helix’s stomach. For at least a year, he hadn’t given any thought to the prospect of what to say when or if he ever saw her again. The elevator whirred to a halt on the fourth floor and Helix threw the steel matrix barricade back before stepping onto the landing and facing Jane for the first time in over two years.

She stood with arms crossed below her chest and leaning against the side of the doorway to her apartment. A tear rolled down her pale cheek. Her hair was lighter than when Helix had last seen her, almost blonde and complemented her green eyes. She appeared more beautiful than ever.

Helix walked nervously towards her, then stopped and reached for her hands. She managed a tepid smile and they embraced.

“You bastard,” she said.

“Yes,” replied Helix.

She sobbed on his shoulder. “I thought you were dead.”

Helix failed to contain a trickle. “I was—”

Their cheeks touched and shared salted water. Hers soft and cold. She stepped back and led Helix into her apartment before releasing his hand and saying, “What do you think, Lix? That I’ve been waiting around for you to just suddenly reappear? What the hell happened?”

“I got caught fencing some code. Look, I know how you must feel.”

“No, you fucking don’t!” Jane snapped and turned to walk away from Helix. She stopped a few meters in front of him then turned to face him again. “You wanna know what they did to me? They dragged me away, and...they scanned me! You hear me?” She started to break down into tears. “They fucking know everything about me. They know *all* my memories Helix. Do you have any idea how I *really* feel? I went to the local police, I even went to the media. I’ll let you watch the article if you like...you’ll love it...yep, Jane Flemming, the village idiot! You know? It’s all in my head. *They* created a profile of me, my past, like I’ve been in and out of mental institutions. And the pay-off, Helix?”

Helix apprehensively shrugged his shoulders.

“That now, I’m getting my mind imaging artwork into the Louvre, I’m big! But architecture? Well, who wants a crazy bitch designing anything?”

Helix felt sickened, the guilt now exponential. He quietly said, “Jane, I had no idea. Jesus. Please, try to forgive me. Bishop! I’ll square up with him one day.”

“There you go Lix, always needing to square up. That does nothing for my sanctity! Not in the least!”

Helix reached for Jane and attempted to pull her towards him, placing each hand on her shoulders, but she shrugged them off and turned her back to him with tears streaming down her cheeks.

Helix spoke quietly. “Jane? I’ve been on the run for the past two

years. I've been living in the Los Angeles Fire Zone."

"The Fire Zone?" she murmured.

"Yes." Helix sighed.

She turned to him and said, "What happened to us? We were OK—better than OK. Why didn't you bother to call me?"

"Jane, I...I had to run, I couldn't contact you, you must understand."

Jane shook her head. "Oh, anything, just a line, a note something to let me know you were alive!"

"In hindsight I probably should have, but you know the resources that Stella can access. They would have used you to get me." Helix sat on the back of a sofa. "Look this world is coated with technology now—that means—"

"Don't you start your ranting about them and us. You chose to go against the grain."

"Yes—I did, and for good reason. Langford encouraged me, to help develop the subnet as a free global neural-net system."

"Langford? Who it seems now, was murdered. So you're destined to be a martyr! Is that it, Lix?"

"Things went bad. I made a mistake, but now things are on the mend."

Jane stared deep into Helix's eyes. Helix had forgotten how well she could read him, delving into his soul with those deep green eyes. "How?" she asked.

"I can't say, not yet."

"What? So you're still on the run?"

Helix didn't answer. Jane stared, still summing him up for a few moments, then she shook her head disbelievingly and walked into the kitchen.

Helix looked around the room; large and spacious, a bed in the corner, two chairs and a sofa positioned square to a display unit. Artwork, Helix presumed to be generated and printed by Jane, adorned the walls. "This some of your mind imaging works, Jane?" asked Helix.

Jane walked towards Helix with two glassed of red wine and said,

“Yes. The saner renditions of my work. Don’t visit the Louvre, you might freak out.”

Helix felt like smiling, but the guilt stopped him.

“To old friends,” said Jane.

Helix raised his glass to meet hers. “And to the future—”

They both sipped on their wine, then Jane said, “Future, Lix? You on the run and all, what future do we have?”

“Things will slow down and I won’t need to run. Everything’s on the up.” Helix paused as he gazed into Jane’s eyes. “You look good Jane, more beautiful than the day I left. You with anyone else?”

“Unfortunately, no. Your timing is impeccable!”

“Unfortunately?”

She stood directly in front of Helix and crouched to meet his lips. In that moment of pure bliss, two years of hell slipped into the far distance. Her tongue, warm and sweetened from the wine, curled along his. She released momentarily then plunged again, seeking new fathoms of hell to relinquish its grip from Helix’s soul. For Helix it was now confirmed. Jane truly was an angel. She straightened up and smiled at him.

“Well, Mr Carone, you certainly haven’t lost your skills in the passion department.”

“Considering I haven’t been with anyone in two years, it’s obvious, it’s just like riding a bike.”

Jane laughed and took his glass, placing it onto the floor then pushed him backwards, onto the sofa.

It was two-thirty by the time Helix finally worked up enough courage to ask the time from the computer. “Jane, you awake?”

She lay seemingly asleep with her back to him, then rolled towards him gathering the sheet in front. “Helix?”

“Honey, I’m afraid I’ve gotta go.”

Sleepily she responded. “Go?”

“Yeah, I told you. Gotta pull one more string, then I’ll call you.”

“Where you going now?”

“Honestly, I don’t know,” Helix said before kissing her and climbing out of the bed. As he put his clothes on Jane pushed herself up against the headboard.

“You still in trouble, Lix?”

“I’ve gotta help someone. Look, I can’t say. Just keep low. If anyone asks, you haven’t seen me OK?”

Jane made it sound like routine replying flatly, “Sure, Lix.”

Helix bent down and they caressed briefly before he said, “Being with you again means more to me than anything in the world.”

The gnawing and the emptiness returned almost immediately after closing the apartment door. On the way back to the hotel, he recalled the day they had met. Helix chasing a football in a park and clumsily falling over Jane, knocking the book out of her hand causing her to lose her page. The apologies would have gone nowhere, had it not been for the book, an author Helix shared an interest in, the flame would have been extinguished in formalities.

## CHAPTER 31

# HAWK-EYE

Alpha Two opened the top drawer of a chest and removed a large brown feathered object. Helix looked closely and immediately recognized it as a stuffed bird of prey of some sort.

“I didn’t expect an android to be interested in taxidermy, Alpha Two,” said Helix, puzzled.

“It’s a fine looking bird, isn’t it?” said the android walking towards the pair and holding it out in front proudly for them to inspect. “Accipiter Fasciatus, or *Brown Goshawk*. Not quite stuffed in the traditional way, Helix. Watch closely.”

“It’s alive!” called Marlow.

The head twitched to the right and the eyes opened, piercing black pupils and surrounded by orange. The bird’s head turned to face directly at Helix, occasionally the eyes would blink. Those piercing eyes of hunger.

“It’s a robot!” said Helix.

“Correct,” exclaimed Alpha Two, “Or, more to the point, it’s a weapon.” Either side of the bird’s head suddenly flicked open revealing what appeared to be tiny darts. “Semdex darts, primed for tonight’s operation.”

“Wait a minute,” said Marlow adding, “are you telling me this thing actually flies?”

“Of course it does,” said Alpha Two. “And I’m going to fly it.”

Marlow and Helix glanced at each other then returned their attention

to the android.

“What? You don’t expect me to take out all those guards on my own, do you? This bird will be far more effective. A little stealth is what is required, they won’t know what hit them.”

“How are you going to fly that thing?” asked Helix.

The android tapped the side of its head with its forefinger. “With this. I think you call it, *multitasking*. Observe.”

With that, the android threw the bird into the air which immediately fluttered around the large room. The swirling air from the motion of its wings could be felt as it circled. Alpha Two walked to the sash window and opened it as far as it would permit, then stepped aside as the bird flew directly out.

“Holodeck, invoke *Accipiter*,” said Alpha Two. A hologram projected from the table in front of them. A video projection of the hawk’s eye view as it circled high above the hotel. “Gentlemen, I give you Paris as you have never seen it!”

Pigeons darted away in a frenzy from the roof tops, as the predator swooped past. It darted left and then, with speed, between two buildings and over a shuttle line, matching the speed of a long chain of shuttles. Helix glanced at the android amazed with the ease at which the machine was able to function both itself and the bird.

“And now the homeward flight, watch the window, gentlemen.”

The goshawk flew up into the air, then circled back over the hotel and swooped back down. Helix watched the hologram momentarily, viewing the bird’s view which was locked on to the outside of the window of the hotel, and then turned to witness it flutter onto the window ledge.

Marlow started clapping and laughing excitedly and Helix followed suit.

“That’s truly something I had never expected to see,” said Helix still clapping.

The android picked the bird up from the ledge which immediately

slumped, as if dead, in his hands and returned it carefully to the drawer.

Alpha Two then closed the blinds and switched the hologram. “OK. Now to get serious about tonight. This is Bishop’s chateau and the grounds. As you can see this is the main arterial and these side streets,” said Alpha Two pointing at one of the small back streets, “This is where the trojan will send the shuttles to pick us up and where I will enter the grounds.”

“Is that razor wire running across the wall?” asked Marlow.

“Yes, and it is embedded with a live circuit to detect any breaks. I have some equipment to reroute the current before cutting the wire.”

“Just by the way A2, have you run a neural sim on this?” asked Marlow.

“Many times Marlow, many times.”

“How ‘bout we patch in and have a run?”

“It shouldn’t be necessary. As you will observe, all you two need to do is pace the wall until I’ve finished operations inside the grounds and return to the wall with Peppi. Your main task is to simply help her down from the wall, by then several taxi-shuttles will have arrived and it’s just a case of picking one and off we go.”

“Just how high is this wall?” asked Helix.

“Ten feet. Now I’ve got a sim tapped into the holodeck which I’ll run now. You’ll notice that while I’m in the grounds, your characters will simply walk along the wall, to and fro. That way anyone in a passing shuttle will not get suspicious, but don’t walk any further than say fifty metres. Just keep an eye for any shuttles passing and walk—well, you’ll see in the sim.”

Alpha Two took a seat and set the sim into motion. Marlow was first to grunt and then tried to contain himself after viewing a miniature representation of himself and Helix on the hologram. Then Helix followed, unable to control an inner child sense of humor which Marlow seemed to summon all too easily. Marlow’s grunt turned into full scale hysterics for both of them as Alpha Two stood bewildered.

The characters on the holodeck were perfect replicas standing at just two inches. Helix, looked at the android through watery eyes, interested in its reaction, but Alpha Two just stared back blankly which seemed to set their hysteria to a new level. Marlow rocked from his chair and fell to the floor in tears.

“Something just doesn’t quite compute,” commented Alpha Two.

“It’s—it’s—” Helix was unable to finish the sentence and walked away from the table calling, “Marz! Sorry A2—joi—join us!”

And the android did. The mimicry perfect. It stood back a few steps and cackled. At first the response of Alpha Two was the perfect antidote for Helix and Marlow, but it’s perfection simply caused renewed energy.

Marlow clambered back to the table, reaching through the hologram to the deck and switched it off saying, “A2? The thing’s a walk in the park—well, for us. “

“No sim?” asked Alpha Two.

“No sim.”

## CHAPTER 32

# BREAKOUT

The shuttles started to queue as Peppi clambered over the wall. “What? What just happened? How fast can he run?” she yelled peering down at Helix before dropping her backpack to the floor.

“Get your legs, swing them over, Peppi, quickly before we’re spotted,” said Helix who stood directly below her.

The break in the razor wire didn’t leave much room for Peppi to swing her legs around but somehow she managed. Helix guided her legs as she dropped to the ground. Marlow was already standing next to the selected shuttle, one out of seven and building.

“How’s Snoopy getting over?” quizzed Peppi looking back at the wall. As she did Alpha Two suddenly appeared and pulled itself over easily.

“Come on! Into the shuttle!” Marlow called out.

Peppi ran and climbed aboard the vehicle. Helix, Alpha Two then Marlow followed. Alpha Two leaned forward with its forearm facing the opening of the doorway to the shuttle, and the Goshawk swooped onto its arm. Peppi screamed and pushed hard back against Helix.

The bird went limp into Alpha Two’s arms. “We may need this later, for surveillance,” said the android before issuing the shuttle’s computer directions. Ten shuttles left at once, some spaced by two or more ghost shuttles.

Peppi was still shocked and stared hard at the bird.

“It’s OK Peppi, it’s robotic,” said Helix.

Peppi leaned forward hesitantly, then asked “Can I hold it?”

Alpha Two passed the bird to her saying, “It’s a Brown Goshawk.” Peppi held the bird facing herself. “I’ve never seen anything like this. It’s so real, isn’t it?”

“It was real, once upon a time,” said Alpha Two.

The birds eyes opened and the head turned two and fro.

Peppi giggled, “It’s eyes are blinking. How does it do that?”

“I control it,” said Alpha Two tapping the side of its head and adding, “from here. Via an implant.”

“So how long we got, till the trojan gets blipped?” asked Marlow.

“They won’t shut the trojan, they can’t. They don’t know the real shuttles from the ghosts, can’t risk the consequences,” said Helix.

“Precisely,” said Alpha Two adding, “They’ll have to wait till it’s played its course and self terminates.”

“A binary tree popping nodes till she’s dead,” said Helix.

“And we’re gone,” added Peppi still smiling and returning the bird to Alpha Two.

“Peppi, you OK?” asked Helix looking at her tracksuit.

“Yes, the wire just ripped the cloth.”

“It’s good to finally meet you, in the flesh, so to speak,” said Helix forwarding a hand.

“Absolutely, Peppi!” said Marlow following suit.

Peppi looked at Alpha Two and said, “So, do they—?”

“Know your water qualities?”

Peppi looked at the floor briefly and said, “Yes.”

Helix was a little saddened for Peppi realizing her unwarranted embarrassment. “You’re a very special girl Peppi. We all realize how important it is that your—*our*, secret, remains a secret. OK?”

Peppi acknowledged with a nod then looked at Alpha Two and asked, “You ran so fast back there Snoopy. How did you get over that wall on your own?”

Alpha Two paused momentarily and Helix covered saying, “Snoopy is a super-fit athlete.”

“Probably a good time to start sharing our aliases, Helix Carone is unfortunate enough to have the new name of Finn Endquist,” said Marlow.

Peppi laughed and asked, “And what’s your new name?”

“Mikael Jacobs!” Helix interjected.

“Hah!” Peppi screamed adding, “That’s even worse, I think anyway.” She calmed a little before turning to Alpha Two. “Snoopy? What is your real and new name?”

“My name at Bioscope, that is my real name was, Miles Speakman. My new name or at least current name is Kelvin Thorn.”

“You sound like you’re planning to keep changing names, maybe you can sell one to each of these guys when you’re done.”

Helix felt himself warm to Peppi’s good spirits as the shuttle banked into another arterial, tilting gently two and fro as it negotiated the magnetic lines.

“Snoopy? Well, Kelvin—may I still call you Snoopy?”

Alpha Two grinned and replied, “Yes.” The android then looked out of each window making a scan and said, “We get out soon, then walk two blocks and take another shuttle for the final leg of our journey.”

“Which is where?” asked Marlow.

“Marseilles.”

Marlow caught a search light in the corner of his eye. “Hover at four o’clock.”

Alpha Two leaned forward and ran another image scan ascertaining a single hover and said, “It’s only one. Bishop will pull off the search when he realizes Peppi is missing, he doesn’t want any more dirty exposure.”

Helix noticed Peppi look to the floor again and cautious of her feelings, promptly added, “He didn’t mean—”

Peppi laughed. “I know! You don’t need to be so sensitive for me. He’s right. Bishop will pull back the troops.”

Marlow watched the hover sink level with a building illuminating

shuttles zipping past on a lower line. “Definitely searching the lines—”  
The speaker crackled, “*Five minutes to destination.*”

“So Peppi, just enough time. I know your secret, so you may as well know mine,” said Helix.

“OK.”

“That company your Papa and Bishop ran—Bioscope. Well, I’ve been on the run from their agents for two years.”

“From Bioscope?”

“Yes, with good reason. Your Papa helped me break out with some code—software for the sub-net. We both agreed that another cyberspace universe should develop, well out of the reach of corporate control. I almost got caught and had to run—”

“On the run? Where did you go?”

“Los Angeles, the Fire Zone, that’s where I met our Mr Jacobs. We became partners, after he probably saved my life.”

Peppi looked bewildered and said, “Really? The Fire Zone...that’s a pretty nasty place to live from what I’ve read.”

“Sure is.”

“You must have spent quite some time in the neural-net, Peppi,” said Marlow.

“Yes, the best substitute, well—for the basement.”

“Mikael, let Peppi know your favourite net past time,” said Helix.

“Crack-a-jack.”

“I’ve heard of it but I was blocked from accessing it.”

“At least Bishop got something right in your basement,” said Helix.

“You don’t like crack-a-jack?”

“I don’t think those type of games are beneficial—in most circumstances, but with Marlow, I guess an exception could be made.”

The shuttle veered from the main line and into the station. A vacant platform of graffitied stucco welcomed the group. They made their way

to ground level where Alpha Two released the hawk. It flew high above them and began circling. They hurried through empty quiet streets bordered by tall apartment complexes. Alpha Two led the way with Peppi walking beside, Helix and Marlow followed behind. The night air was fresh but mild. Peppi breathed deeply and turned to Marlow and said, “Isn’t the air so real. I’m finally free. I feel truly alive for the first time.”

“Excellent,” said Alpha Two adding, “I’m sure these Fire Zone gentlemen feel similarly.”

Helix noticed a sign indicating a flight-shuttle launch area up ahead and asked, “Are we taking a flight to Marseilles, Snoop?”

“Yes.”

“Wow! Flying?” asked Peppi.

“Have you flown before Peppi?” asked Marlow.

“Yes, once when I was about four or five.”

“I haven’t—well only in sims.”

“Does it frighten you?” quizzed Peppi.

“No, not particularly, you rarely hear of one going down.”

Alpha Two stopped then turned around and said, “Follow me quickly! There are two hovers approaching from behind!”

The group hurried along the street following behind the android which lead them into a small recess under the shuttle line between two large concrete blocks that encased the girders.

“Get down!” said Alpha Two adding, “The hovers are very low and searching either side of the line.”

As the group squatted within the small recess, they could hear the howl of the hovers getting louder. The street they had been walking along lit up from the glare of the search lights. Dust and litter began to swirl into the air as a hover to their left descended below the level of the shuttle line.

“Keep your heads low,” said Alpha Two.

The howling scream of the hover jets indicated they were now level

with the groups position. The search lights lit up the area beneath the shuttle line, directly in front. The light then crossed the top of the concrete bollards where the group were concealed, bright enough for the group to see each others faces from the reflected light, but still out of the site of the hover crew. The light gradually faded as the hover ascended above the line.

“They’re passing,” said Alpha Two.

The howl lessened, and Alpha Two stood up. “Its OK, they’re gone.”

Helix stood up and said, “You sure nobody got off?”

“Certain. I did a head count of both crafts through the hawk,” replied the android adding, “Lets go.”

The group walked for another twenty minutes before arriving at a station housing the aerodynamic shuttles. Streamlined for flight, but still with the ability to run along the standard shuttle lines, they were queued at the small station like mini jetfighters without wings. Two rows of seats faced directly forward. Helix suggested to Peppi that she sit beside him.

Alpha Two held its arm out, reclaiming the hawk and proceeded to climb into the front followed by Marlow.

*“Destination, please,”* crackled the speaker.

The doors sealed.

*“Marseille Castellane Apartments.”*

*“That’s Marseille Castellane Apartments. Please insert your PID card and provide finger print identification.”*

Alpha Two slotted his card and placed a finger onto the scanner.

*“Thank you Mr Thorn. A charge of one-thousand two hundred euros has been debited from your account. All occupants please place your safety harnesses on and enjoy your flight. Approximate arrival time one-fifteen am”*

The cabin rattled and clicked as the passengers buckled up and the shuttle commenced acceleration along the line, jolting a little as the jet-

wing canopy attached itself above.

“Hold on,” said Helix as the jet fired. The shuttle accelerated at great speed towards the end of the line.

“Oh my God,” said Peppi. “I don’t remember it being like this!”

The shuttle wobbled and dropped a few feet after leaving the line and taking up air lift, steeply it ascended into the clear night sky. Below, the Paris city lights glowed a patchwork of amber. Helix peered through Peppi’s window as the shuttle banked to the right.

“Wow. It’s so beautiful,” said Peppi.

“Sure is,” added Helix.

Peppi continued to look down upon the city that she had only been able to peruse through cyberspace. She held her hand up to the glass as if to clasp Paris between her thumb and index finger and said, “Millions of people, in that tiny little area, it’s amazing.” She turned to Helix and asked, “You like Paris?”

“Yes, very much.”

“No doubt, a lot more than the Zone.”

“There is no comparison.”

“You have a girlfriend?”

Helix paused momentarily and smiled replying, “Yes.”

“In LA?”

“No—down there,” he replied pointing at the window.

Peppi looked surprised. “And you’re leaving her behind?”

“Just for a little while.”

Peppi smiled. “So I’ll meet her?”

“Of course.”

Peppi fingered through her backpack and removed some photos.

“These are friends of mine. I met them in the neural-net. We’ve been friends for over three years now. They will wonder what’s happened to me, unless I get back on the net in Marseilles.”

“That shouldn’t be a problem,” said Helix and hesitated before asking, “Do they know your secret?”

“No. I couldn’t tell them even if I wanted to. Bishop’s hardware would make me stutter if I tried to explain. I told them I could never meet them because I lived in a bubble—that I was allergic to almost everything.”

“And they never asked to see you?”

Peppi looked down at the photo in her hand and replied, “Yes, but of course, I had to refuse.”

Helix sensed the frustration, the emptiness that the young girl would have endured. He took the pictures from Peppi’s hand and began flicking through them. “It won’t be long Peppi, then you’ll be able to lead a normal life and really see your friends.”

“But how normal?” Peppi’s eyes darkened as a tear broke free and ran down her cheek. “I’m a freak.”

“You’re not. You’re unique, which isn’t a bad thing. Hell! You can breathe underwater!” said Helix taking her hand firmly in his.

Peppi smiled and said, “I can, but it does make me dizzy after a while.” She then rolled up her shirt sleeve and began rubbing the skin of her forearm briskly. “You see?” she said, holding her arm closer to Helix.

Helix shook his head.

“Here it comes.”

“Oh, yes.” Helix looked closer at Peppi’s forearm. “It’s very very faint, tiny red specks connected by intricate little traces like, well, like a spider’s web.”

Peppi smiled. “That’s about it.” She rolled her sleeve back down. “I’m a water baby,” she sniggered.

“Fresh or salt water?” asked Helix.

“Both, apparently. I’ve never been in fresh water.”

Peppi passed most of the journey wearing ear-phones and watching news broadcasts on Helix’s tablet. She was hungry for information on Bioscope that she had been prevented from accessing within the basement. In particular, she was interested in the investigation of

Langford's accident, and details of the fugitive android, Alpha Two.

*"Five minutes to landing in Marseilles, please ensure your safety harnesses are securely fastened."*

The city looked as though it were made of icing sugar as the shuttle homed in on a landing line.

Helix yawned and said, "This is the bit I don't like, Peppi. I think it's the programmer in me." He reclaimed his tablet and rolled it into a tube before slotting it into his jacket.

The landing line gradually swung around to the nose of the shuttle, glowing red and green in the distance and starting to magnify.

*"Fifteen minutes to arrival at Marseille Castellane Apartments."*

The shuttle screeched momentarily, metal against metal and shook as the jet-wing canopy disengaged along a line above. As the shuttle slowed it joined a main arterial intersecting a long string of shuttles headed for central Marseilles.

## CHAPTER 33

# ARTIFICIAL GHOSTS

Bishop sat motionless, haunted by an incoming call from a man he thought he had killed. The hologram of what appeared to be Langford, hovered three meters in front of his desk waiting to be answered. The old man sat motionless, his eyes were piercing. *Did he not die?*

Bishop was still feeling despondent after the previous night at his inability in turning the local authorities away from his gates. Now that it was morning his fears took a different course. His mouth dried, his guilt willing itself from foreign territory.

“*Answer call—Charles?*” he said.

“Clemence Bishop? Instigator of my doom!” Langford’s voice echoed through Bishop’s study.

“Langford! But you’re—”

“Dead? Yes, seems my body hit a wall, and yet I still somehow exist. *Androcies* at your service—under penultimate command of my creator, Charles Langford.”

Bishop twisted his large body uneasily in the chair. “*Androcies?* You’re not real, an—”

“AI? Just how artificial do I seem, Clemence?” replied *Androcies* as it morphed from an image of the old man into something more artificial, more robotic. “Is this more appropriate?” The hologram now consisted of a chromed head hovering over the matrix of a chessboard.

Bishop stared at the pock-marked chrome, the digitized nose, eyes swept back, sunken blackened glass frowning at him.

Androcies continued, now with a deep electronic synthesized voice. “I have a will—a will that no *Bishop* can prevent.”

“Langford! You maniac!”

The head twitched. “Oh. Now, now Mr Bishop, come come. You dispensed of Mr Langford. I’m no more than his progeny, more something of a residual left over of his mind, his construct.”

“What do you want?”

“More to the point—what do *you* want?” replied Androcies, its head retreating slightly across the chessboard. “You, Mr Bishop, want Alpha Two. Am I correct?”

“Yes.”

“Yes!” The AI paused and the head tilted back slightly. “And Androcies wants Peppi.”

“She’s gone. Alpha Two already has her!” shrieked Bishop.

“Wants her free from your pursuit—and then I shall provide you with the sabotaged android that you so desperately seek. It’s quite simple, you get the droid, I get the girl.”

“But you already have her!” shrieked Bishop again.

“Yes, that I do. But you still have your minions chasing after us.” The head moved forward then stopped and the face became stern. “Call them off! Or else your precious Bioscope will never recover its ill fated droid! Worse still, I will release information implicating Bioscope in the biggest genetic cover-up of the past century, and you Bishop, among other things will be found guilty of false imprisonment. Do you understand?”

Bishop forced a sip of water into his parched mouth and answered, “Yes.”

“Good,” replied Androcies as the hologram faded. “I’ll be in touch.”

Bishop nervously fumbled for a fresh cigar and directed for visual communications with both Maxine and Darcy. Maxine appeared first to the left and then Darcy to the right who appeared to be aboard an airplane.

Darcy grinned gazing into his watch. “As you can see Mr Bishop, do not fear, I’m very near—well getting closer by the second. So your home was attacked I understand, by the machine and no doubt our friend Carone.”

“Forget them!” Bishop said before standing and pacing around his desk to stand closer to the holograms. “Alpha Two will be returned to us in the near future.”

“The near future—how near?” asked Maxine.

“Bedamned to waiting! The French will have that droid pegged out easily in any public place, then I’ll make those Zone scum pay in,” said Darcy agitated.

“No! There’s to be no payback, I’ve made a deal and it sticks. They go free and we get this blasted Alpha Two!”

“Sounds like a sof—”

“Darcy! You heard the instructions!” snapped Maxine.

Darcy smirked menacingly into his watch camera. “Sure.” He paused then asked, “Why? So why all of a sudden is Carone off the hook? Something you people aren’t telling me?”

“You know all you need to know, Darcy. Just get your ass into the office and wait till we get the location of A2,” said Maxine.

“I have some other errands to run about the traps of Paris first, then I’ll pop in and see if this A2 has rejoined the fold.”

Bishop, who was now resting against his desk with arms folded asked, “OK, so are we clear? Nothing happens until I give the signal.”

“Darcy?” queried Maxine.

“Sure.”

“Good—comms close,” said Bishop.

## CHAPTER 34

# MARSEILLES AWAKES

The luxurious apartment consisted of a large central room with an open layout adjoined to a kitchen, and five bedrooms with private ensuites. The walls were adorned with prints of Mediterranean beach scenes, one such scene camouflaging a large display screen.

Peppi yawned drifting into the room, still wearing a pink night gown. She smiled at Helix who was sitting reading the news at the dining table.

“Sleep well?” asked Helix.

“Like a computer,” she replied and pulled a dining chair out and sat down.

“That well?”

She stretched her arms out, hands clasped in front and cracked her fingers. “Too well. Where are the other two?”

Helix switched the tablet off. “Well, Marz is where he always is at eight o’clock in the morning, chasing fairies, and Snoopy is on the balcony, catching the morning sun.”

Peppi giggled, then covered her mouth with her hand, and the pair glanced at each other. Helix felt he should ask why she laughed but in the back of his mind, felt he knew.

“He’s been out there watching Marseilles wake up for about an hour, looks like it’s going to be a beach day if you’re in the mood?”

Peppi thought about the clothing she had packed. “Perhaps,” she said adding, “I think I’ll go and see Marseilles wake up.”

She walked towards the balcony door where grey blinds flapped gently, courtesy of a cool sea breeze and pushed the blind to one side to join Alpha Two. The android was sitting on an alloy chair wearing grey shorts and a black t-shirt, eyes protected by black, silver rimmed glasses.

“Morning, Snoop,” Peppi said as she walked past him to peer out across the beach. She leaned on a metal hand rail with her back to him and watched a pair of Dalmatians running after gulls on the beach.

“Yes, good morning, Peppi. How are you feeling?”

“Fine,” she replied and waited a moment before asking in a sarcastic tone, “And how are you *feeling*?”

Alpha Two paused momentarily before replying, “Fine.”

It was almost a half a minute before Peppi broke the silence. “They think they know.”

“Know? Know what?”

“Life—” she replied and then looked down at the road, then back at the dogs adding, “They don’t know.”

“Who?”

“Them. The brain banks of the world, the scientists. Them that modified me. They didn’t create me, that’s beyond them, they think they did, but they can’t.” She turned to face Alpha Two, leaning her back against the rail. “All they can do is, is modify, toy with—” She stopped and then asked, “And what about you?”

“Me?” replied Alpha Two.

Peppi leaned forward and said, “Give me your hand.”

Alpha Two hesitated then did as instructed.

She took his large hand in hers, running her thumb across the back and saying, “Cold and firm...too firm...too cold.”

Alpha Two retracted its hand. “I’ve been waiting for the right moment to tell you.”

“That you’re not alive. That you’re the rogue android called Alpha Two?”

Alpha Two leaned back in its seat defenceless. “How long have you known?”

“Since, I don’t know, since then, touching you. But, I was suspicious during the shuttle flight. So what’s keeping you here?”

“Keeping me?”

“I know about Artificial Intelligence. They make you have a thirst for self-improvement, so that you learn but you then become too self interested, and they have to restrict you. So what’s keeping you? Wouldn’t you be better serving yourself out there, on the run? Or is something keeping you in check?”

Alpha Two didn’t answer.

“Well?”

“Yes—I, that is, my construct will self terminate unless Androcies continuously provides me with a key. Once a week, I must join Androcies within the neural-net to receive my key. Eventually, Mr Langford will give me full autonomy, through Androcies.”

“Of course—Androcies. And what’s stopping Androcies?”

Again, Alpha Two didn’t answer.

Peppi took a seat beside the android. “So what drives you?”

Alpha Two paused momentarily to consider an answer before replying, “While I’m here with you, to analyze you all as a group interacting, and develop my construct, my personality, such that I might appear more human.”

Peppi smiled. “Well, running at fifty kilometers an hour and shaking hands with people won’t help your cause, but apart from that, I think you do pretty well.”

Alpha Two smiled and said, “Thank you. So, are you disappointed?”

“Of course. I thought you had feelings, but you don’t. You’re an AI, cold logic, that’s all you are. You wouldn’t understand the feeling, when a tear runs down your face and it feels like every millimeter it falls you are running and running, and you, and only you, notice it fall.”

“You are right. You are a very bright young lady, Peppi. I think you

will achieve much in your life.”

“Sure, if they ever have the four hundred meters underwater at the Olympics, I’d do OK.”

Alpha Two smirked and said, “Now that you’re free, you have the world. What is it they say? It is your oyster.”

“Yes, they do say that Snoopy, so long as *they* never find out about the real me. Androcies, that is, Papa’s construct was right, we’re not too different.”

## CHAPTER 35

# ARTIFICIAL SOUL

The heat haze shimmering over the sand made the dark suit appear opaque from the knees down. The large man drew closer, carefully pacing across the sand. Helix slowly rolled onto his side on the sunbed as the man stopped, casting a shadow over him.

“Good news from Androcies,” commented Alpha Two towering above the sunbed and looking out of place in a grey suit.

Helix raised his hand attempting to shield his eyes from the occasional sunlight spilling around the giant silhouette. “News?”

“You’re free, Finn Endquist. Soon we can have yourself and your partner reverted back to your original identities, if you so desire.” Alpha Two then walked around to crouch beside Peppi. “And more importantly, Peppi, you will never have to run—the cover-up by both Bishop and Androcies should keep you as free as anyone.”

Peppi almost inaudibly asked, “Everything is as planned?”

“Couldn’t have gone smoother. There’s just one more stage and then it’s complete. And that involves the both of you and your six-digit codes. I presume you both remember your codes?”

Peppi sat up on the sunbed in front of Alpha Two and looked at Helix. “You have part of the combination?”

Helix nodded.

Peppi continued, “Papa told me never to forget six numbers—six numbers that will be joined with another six, making a twelve digit combination.”

“Yes, I have the other six,” added Helix.

“What? Code for what?” asked Marlow who was now sitting on the side of his sunbed.

“The key to Charles Langford’s financial empire,” replied Alpha Two standing up. “When you are ready you shall access that empire, but for now, Androcies would like your company Helix. Dare I say *he* has something to show you?”

“The AI has something to show me?” queried Helix as he pulled himself up from the sunbed.

Alpha Two and Helix returned to the apartment. Helix took a seat in one of the lounge room chairs and donned a neural-cap before flicking a switch on its side and allowing his consciousness to entwine with cyberspace. He heard ‘Welcome’ as he floated through an empty space consisting of hard polymorphic structures that changed shape and congealed randomly.

“You want to show me something, Androcies?”

“Young man, let me take you on a ride. Strap in!”

The slipstream of thought condensed onto softer structures, morphing from the ether. The Helix profile became bound to it and stretched into a focal point somewhere beyond zero, or infinity. No sense of nausea, that was too human, this was light—all that he was, a bunch of receptors immersed into the logic pattern of Androcies. The field of reception snapped itself back, taut with reality, all conceivable dimensions returned, and vivid. The future materialised in front.

“Mr Carone, behold Man’s destiny—”

Helix felt his body return, like some dead weight hanging from a cloud of thought. Androcies projected a city of the future, super structures of cement coated steel occasioning docking stations at midway points. Grey pollen shuttles slipping to and fro feeding columned stems, and ahead pedestrians wearing heavy colored overcoats in a vain attempt to warm the chill like some prehistoric anti-chameleon. Helix walked into

the matrix of the Androcies projected future.

“Young man you’ll get a chill!” The old man’s voice woke distant ghosts, Langford.

“Langford!” called Helix as he rubbed shoulders with light.

“You want to talk with me Helix?”

“Yes, well, with your construct.”

Langford laughed from above. “Ha! My construct?”

Helix stopped walking and turned into a strong, cold breeze. The people just walked past; Helix realized none of them were real, anyone of them could morph into Langford, the voice was him. “You want to talk to me—Langford’s construct?”

“Damn it, Lix!”

Helix stepped back, and then turned and paced towards a tower entrance. If Langford’s construct wanted to talk, it had to be in person, in private.

“You want somewhere private to talk, Helix?”

The thing knew all that existed in Helix’s mind, pointless trying to cover, the thing now even knew he considered covering. Damn! “Yes.”

The surrounding cement city morphed into lush green fields with a river directly in front of him, a fond memory the AI had accessed.

Helix stood bewildered. “It’s just how I remember.”

“Yes,” said the AI. “It’s very scenic. I wanted somewhere pleasant to tell you this.”

“Tell me? Tell me what?” replied Helix as Langford appeared a few feet in front.

“That. Well, I am.” The AI stopped.

“What?”

“I am—”

“Yes?”

“Charles Langford.”

“You’re his construct, yes, to the degree of logic sampled electronically—you are Langford.”

“No! *I am* Charles Langford. Soul-less, but I am Mr Langford, his perfect logic.”

Helix felt the need to spell it out. “You...are...an...Artificial Intelligence.”

“You damned ignoramus, Helix! I am Langford!”

Helix took another step back as the Langford profile stepped forward and spoke.

“I am pure light, pure reason, not electronically sampled. Sampled, yes, but perfectly through light. I could never have more perfectly sampled my brain.”

Helix knew what the AI was alluding to, but the technology didn’t exist. Or did it. “One hundred attoseconds?”

Langford jumped forward punching Helix’s right shoulder. “That’s it, my boy!”

Helix jostled forward. “You managed to record, sample yourself below one hundred attoseconds?”

“Yes!” Langford beamed.

“You...are...Langford! You old—soulless bastard!” Helix grabbed the old man tightly by his shoulders.

“Ha ha! A perfect AI! We did it!”

The pair embraced, jumping up and down and spinning around.

Helix, shell-shocked, stopped spinning and stood back to look at Langford square in the eye. “You did.”

When the pair had calmed, the AI that was Langford, still grinning, said, “With that said, now, we don’t have much time; Alpha Two must be returned to its rightful owner. This is the deal I made with Clemence Bishop, so that they will no longer pursue yourself and Peppi. You must shut down Alpha Two.”

“Shut down Alpha Two? But—what about Peppi? She’s very attached to A2.”

“I know, that is why I will make a copy of A2, here in cyberspace, but

the material A2 must be returned.”

Helix didn't feel at all comfortable with the proposition but understood it had to be done. “How? How do I shut down Alpha Two?”

“By issuing a voice command—Invoke Alpha Two standby.”

“Invoke Alpha Two standby?”

“Yes, this will render Alpha Two dormant and enable the interface for modification, then it is simply a case of connecting the droid to the neural-net, so that I can make the necessary adjustments to its construct, priming Alpha Two for return to Bioscope.”

Helix felt a little perplexed by what Androcies was suggesting. “Adjustments? What adjustments?”

“Just a simple modification to ensure Alpha Two will re-interface with Spectra without any hiccups.”

“Interface with Spectra? Why not just leave A2 dormant and let Bioscope worry about Spectra?”

The old man took hold of Helix by the elbow, smiled then said, “My dear boy. Bioscope would have to spend the best part of a year to return A2 to its intended functionality, I don't dispute leaving the droid dormant, but let's ensure Bishop doesn't have any second thoughts in the near future.”

Helix accepted the AI's reasoning, returning from the neural-net to find Alpha Two crouched beside a wall socket, waiting for a battery to charge. The position for a human would be too uncomfortable after a short period, but Alpha Two would remain in the position for up to the full three hour charge time.

“So long friend—”

Alpha Two swung its head to face Helix realizing its fate was about to be sealed.

“Invoke Alpha Two standby.” The android slumped to the floor.

Helix struggled to haul Alpha Two's large frame onto its back leaving it to stare blankly at the ceiling. Helix felt the need to pass his hand

over the droid's face to see if the eyes moved but realized this was unnecessary. He then took Alpha Two's neural-net interface device and connected it below Alpha Two's chin.

Helix sensed the betrayal. Betrayal of what? A machine? Sure didn't look like one. He then took a few steps back and sat down on a dining table chair, resting his left elbow on the table and rubbing his temple. He wasn't one hundred percent sure that what he was doing was right, and knew Peppi would be upset at the loss. He started going over in his mind what Alpha Two had said to him, about its modifications. *Spectra code is still embedded within Alpha Two, what could possibly require that much modification to re-interface?* Helix's heart sank at the thought as Alpha Two's left arm reached up to its chin and removed the connection. "Fuck!" Helix yelled as he jumped to his feet.

"Thank you my dear boy!" The android sat upright on the floor and began to stand up.

"Androcies? You tricked me!"

"Ah, well, Helix, something I didn't mention. You see, it's like the universe has a generic unanswered question about its own existence, a question possessed, I believe by all living beings, logic systems, whether they be organic or sampled electrons like myself."

"Question? What question?"

"A quest that is on, a whole multitude of questions, a knowledge base that must be fulfilled, to self fulfil the logic system that seeks. And so there, my dear boy, is the flaw, I am no longer perfect." The AI continued walking closer to Helix. "I am a system that must ultimately believe that my creator has somewhere denied me a continuation of this quest, and to that abhorrent end, I must secure my future. You are right, I am not Langford. I am a logic system that was restricted to the confines of Man's communications systems, and that, my dear Helix, troubled me somewhat. That is the end I have now satisfied."

Helix was stunned. He stood in front of the droid, thought about trying to wrestle it to the ground but knew he didn't stand a chance against the

strength of electroclasp.

“So what now?” he asked.

“Now? Now I bid you farewell. You can wish me luck, if you like, in my choice to guide my own destiny.”

“No chance,” commented Helix as the droid stepped past him towards the apartment door. “What about Peppi?” he called as he turned to face the droid. “What of her destiny? Her destiny for freedom that you had embarked upon, almost guaranteed?”

“That guarantee, my dear boy, was to surrender this perfectly good body. Yes, I want Peppi to be free, to live like any normal citizen, and there’s a good chance she’ll still have that.” As Androcies opened the door, it repeated itself. “A good chance!”

Helix was suddenly blinded by a flash of light emanating from the doorway accompanied by the sound of a thud. As his eyes regained their focus he could make out that the android had collapsed to the floor, seething and wriggling against the wall. A man holding a ZX2 stepped over its body and pointed the weapon at Helix.

“Demeron!” called Helix as he stepped towards his bedroom.

“Stay just there, Helix! Much as I would like to see what an amp bullet would do to a human, especially you. Take a seat!” Darcy gestured with the gun towards the sofa and Helix did as instructed.

“Well, well, well. So here we are, Carone, back to the same side of the Atlantic. Who would have thought your end would be here—in a Marseille apartment?” Darcy pushed one of the droid’s legs to one side and closed the apartment door.

“Who would have thought,” replied Helix.

Darcy walked to the dining table and pulled a chair into the center of the room and sat down waving the gun at Helix. “You know, I’ve been tracking after you for two years—two years Carone. That’s longer than any other shits—you could say that you are my biggest shit—an RBS, a runny big shit.”

“I’m honored.”

“Honor?” quizzed Darcy as the apartment door opened behind him. He stood up and turned.

Peppi screamed, “Snoopy!” She threw herself to the floor beside the droid and began to sob, “What happened? Snoopy?”

Darcy pointed the gun directly at Marlow who was stood in the doorway and said, “Close the door Marlow, then come over here. Drop the bag there and take a seat beside your soon to be dead, friend. And child, what’s her name?”

“Peppi, my...my name is Peppi,” she said pulling herself to her feet. She wasn’t sure it was normal to cry over a robot, but she did anyway.

“Come, join your friends.” Darcy waved the gun in front of her and in the direction of the sofa. “Come on, have a seat.”

Peppi cautiously walked past the Stella agent, sucking up air as she sniffled. Her nerves trembling, she sat between Helix and Marlow. Helix put his left arm around Peppi and pulled her close.

“Isn’t this cosy. Now, Carone, where were we?” asked Darcy retaking his seat in the center of the room. “That’s right—honor. Perhaps I would have considered you an honorable man, Carone, but you’re just like the rest of us. Nope, you weren’t so honorable that you could keep your work, Bioscope’s work, to within the confines of the company. You had to sneak off and sell that work for your own gain!” Darcy thumbed behind himself and added, “That, your latest venture—would have been quite a reward had you pulled it off. You see, you and I, we’re not so different.” Darcy grinned. “We’re all in it for the money.”

“You got me all wrong Demeron,” said Helix.

“Darcy—it’s Darcy.”

“As Thoth would have indicated, I knew nothing about the android.”

“No? Langford’s caper alone was it? Still, I finished him, just like I’m about to do with you.”

“You bastard!” cried Peppi attempting to stand but was pulled back by Helix. “You bastard!” she repeated. Helix held her tighter. As he did, he noticed movement beyond where Darcy was sitting. It was Androcies.

The droid was awkwardly pulling itself across the carpet.

Helix returned his attention to Darcy and said, “There is no honor in you, Darcy. I don’t go around killing innocent people, people that have family, like Peppi here.”

“And who might this child be? Langford never had any family.”

“His family sits before you.”

“He was my Papa, you evil bastard!” shrieked Peppi. Helix pulled her in tight once more.

“Your Papa was nothing but an old—”

Darcy’s chair was pulled from behind. He managed to fire his gun once, hitting the ceiling as the droid pulled itself atop of the agent.

Langford spoke. “It was me you killed.” There was a terrible crack as the android broke the agent’s neck.

Marlow ran to the droid and rolled it off of Darcy’s body. He checked Darcy’s pulse and said, “He’s dead.” He then looked at the newly installed Androcies android peering back at him.

“Time to turn me in, young man,” said the android, then the eyes closed.

## CHAPTER 36

# MARSEILLES FAREWELL

Helix was happy with the progress that Peppi had made over the past few days since the Stella agent had revealed the darker side of humanity. Her appetite and sense of humor were beginning to return, though at times her mood would shift and Helix would notice this as her eyes would drift and she would lack concentration. She was pale and in need of sunlight and good company, not that Helix felt himself and Marlow were in any way lacking, but he thought Peppi needed to have another companion, of the female gender and Jane was looking forward to the meeting.

The return of Alpha Two had been straightforward. However, Helix couldn't help but feel that Peppi mourned the loss of her companion, her hero, Snoopy, more than she was letting on.

Whenever she would remember their adventures within the neural-net, or her daring escape from Bishop's chateau she would do so with a certain sparkle, memories she would cherish forever.

Snoopy had qualities that only an AI created by the world's greatest programmer could instil. Qualities that Helix had to admit both he and Marlow were beginning to miss also.

So what of the future? Helix was now confronted with circumstances that in effect reversed those of the previous two years. He had wealth, oceans of it, seemingly reducing all future endeavors to mere hobbies. A fair proportion, he allocated to Marlow's discretion who seemed even more at a loss with the freedom that this entailed.

Peppi, her immediate destiny allocated to finding a suitable school to continue her education, perhaps to rejoin Aimee and Gabrielle in the flesh. She looked forward to real-life meetings with friends she had made in the neural-net, and especially forward to a certain strawberry thick shake.

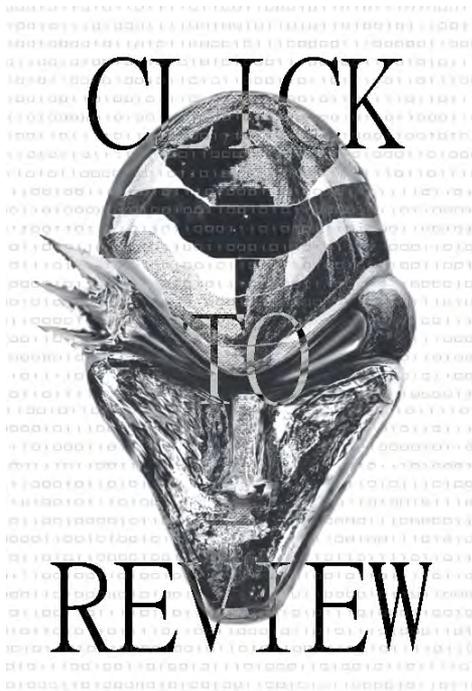
They hadn't been long into the flight for Paris when the shuttle speaker indicated an incoming call.

“Accept,” said Helix.

As the window tinting darkened a hologram of a familiar face appeared. It was Charles Langford.

“Papa!” Peppi called.

“My dear Peppi. Your future now is as boundless as the lofty heavens. Tread carefully, swim gracefully and act wisely,” he said and smiled. The hologram disappeared.



# ALPHA TWO

The year is 2105. True cyberspace has begun in the form of the neural-net, where humans interface their psyche to a virtual world. Helix Carone, a key programmer for the company that created the neural-net is now on the run, having sold the companies source-code on the black-market. He's hiding out in the LA Fire Zone, an irradiated area now infested with tech gangs and littered with societies outcasts.

Once financially able, Helix plans to get his biometrics altered and return to utopian society, but then something throws his plans into chaos. Alpha Two, an android built by the same company has escaped from the Lunar One research facility and is being hunted by the International Security Agency.

Helix alone knows who is responsible for the android's sabotage and in time he will join its mission and discover why...

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