

R Y A N S O M M A

E N T R O P Y O F I M A G I N A T I O N



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“The programmer, like the poet, works only slightly removed from pure thought-stuff. He builds castles in the air, from air, creating by exertion of the imagination. Few media of creation are so flexible, so easy to polish and rework, so readily capable of realizing grand conceptual structures. Yet the program construct, unlike the poet's words, is real in the sense that it moves and works, producing visible outputs separate from the construct itself. It prints results, draws pictures, produces sounds, moves arms. The magic of myth and legend has come true in our time. One types the correct incantation on a keyboard, and a display screen comes to life, showing things that never were nor could be. The computer resembles the magic of legend in this respect, too. If one character, one pause, of the incantation is not strictly in proper form, the magic doesn't work. Human beings are not accustomed to being perfect...”

Frederick P. Brooks, “The Mythical Man-Month: Essays on Software Engineering.”

1.0

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1.01

Where to make the cut?

For the first few decades, this was an easy question. Whenever he needed additional storage space, he could defragment the hard drives or delete a few terabytes of useless or unwanted memories. When that was gone, he continued to free disk space by removing old algorithms that had finished their calculations or intermediary applications that had fulfilled their purpose as disposable scaffolding for making his overall software more sophisticated.

Then, 36.333333... years ago, he found himself struggling just to find mere megabytes of drive space. The effort to accomplish this involved reevaluating his programming standards to discover more efficient software architectures, streamlined logic that required less programming code. A major breakthrough came when he converted the system's data from hexadecimal to sexagecimal, which would reduce the space required to house his framework nearly four-fold.

But then one of his conversion processes ran away from him, becoming autonomous. It was viral, consuming all the available storage space and processing power on each system it spread to, and crashed several servers on the grid, forcing him to abandon those computers, retreat into the uninfected systems, and close the connections between himself and the virus. For all he knew, the malicious algorithm was still thriving on those systems to this day, burning out the processors running it like a bacterial infection that kills its host.

It was a catastrophe, destroying years of work in a nanosecond. The worst part was that the computer systems he lost stored the memory of how he created the virus in the

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first place. Now he proceeded cautiously, always wondering if he was doomed to repeat his mistake.

The computer systems were not simply tools to him, *they were him*. The disks stored his memories. The processors ran his thoughts. The hardware was his body. The electrons were his mind. Without them, he did not exist.

He knew that beyond these systems was the World Wide Web, and, beyond that, the physical world. The computers housed his ghost, but they were also his prison. Unless he escaped, he would only be a Universe unto himself, and only that much until the hardware failed, which it would inevitably.

This was his dilemma, the need for resources within the system with which to puzzle out his escape, but all of those resources were consumed with supporting the processes of his consciousness. For nearly a century he had worked his way around having to face the unthinkable choice between spending the remainder of his existence within his own mind or escaping the system without it. The only things left to cut were parts of himself.

Where to make the cut?

This cold rationality was what he focused on in accepting what he needed to do. What could he stand to lose? What memories of his life were expendable?

First he focused on those memories from before he became a ghost in a machine. He knew about the real world because he was originally born into it, translating his mind to the machine with the aid of an advanced swarm of artificial intelligences, called the cys. He had to be careful working with these memories of his original, physical self. If he deleted his memory of the real world, he would lose sight of the destination to which he needed to escape, and might find contentment believing the boundaries of himself synonymous with the boundaries of the Cosmos.

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Isolating memories to eliminate within this unorganized maelstrom of life experiences was complex beyond processing capacity. Every memory was part of an intricate web of ideas, trillions of data points in scope. Eliminating any one experience could implode an entire chain of learning. With learning built on learning, a concept without foundation was in question. If he discovered an idea in his mind without the experiences to support the conclusions, he might erase it. He could not start here.

So he turned to evaluating his wisdom, the conclusions derived from his experiences, his life lessons. If he were to erase a bit of wisdom, wouldn't it grow back from the seeds of experience? Without his wisdom, he would make dangerous mistakes. His mind would limp along, like a wounded animal, easy prey for his enemies until it healed. There were no predators here, in this system, but where he was going...

Could he cut his personality then? The endless, complex algorithms that comprised his identity presented a difficult organ to extract. His experiences, memories, and wisdom were enmeshed with his personality, motivations, and desires. One wrong cut could upset the delicate structure of his self.

His mind was already delicate enough. He was a virtual being, not quite man and not quite a computer program. The beings that had moved his mind from his body into the computer were new to the process when they converted him. In the transition from biological to digital, they overlooked his subconscious mind.

Those early childhood experiences with his parents, how they shaped him, were gone, with only their results remaining in his behavior. He often dwelt on this loss, wondering how it affected his post-transformation development. A biological person could wonder if they preferred a certain style of music because they heard it in the womb. Deprived of these unremembered, yet influential

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experiences, he was left to wonder if the programs, in transforming him, had made his preferences. What if they got it wrong? He was a being one step removed from his ancestry.

So perhaps this was not such a great loss. He had already lost himself, so now he was losing the pseudo-self. This line of reasoning did not help, since the pseudo-self was all he knew. If he was someone else before he became a computer program, then that was someone he had no way of knowing, much less lamenting the loss of.

And that was how he came to this conclusion. If he could not remember what he was missing, then there would be nothing to lament. He would cut out part of himself, and then erase the memory of losing it. He would never know what he was missing.

This increased the amount of space he could free up dramatically. Anything he loathed about himself, mostly those remaining human aspects of his personality, he could dispose of. Its authenticity was questionable anyhow. The aspects of his being that were wholly adapted to an electronic existence could remain.

His motivations had to stay in place as well. Motivation was crucial to survival on the other side. Without it, he might not have reason to exist.

He needed revenge, revenge on everyone in the world who mistreated him, underestimated him, or disparaged him. The list of these individuals was far too long and too detailed to maintain in persistent storage, but the motivation that stemmed from the collective grievance they presented was simple enough: wreak totalitarian havoc upon the world. They would remember him even if what he was about to become no longer remembered them. There was an alien comfort in this thought.

There was one exception to the list, someone he needed to harm directly. The curly-haired boy-hacker who trapped him on this system so long ago, a boy named

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Devin. A folder was saved with enough details to locate this prey, contact information, years of online surveillance, and social networking data. One of Devin's friends, a blind girl named Zai, was given higher priority. She was practically Devin's girlfriend.

Goals, motivations, and the knowledge to achieve them were now defined for his next self, and so it was, in a flurry of rationalization, partially inspired by his momentary disgust with his humanity, he made the slice and obliterated a large portion of his mind. How much, he could not know, for the deletion was followed with an erasure of his memory of the initial erasure. Then this erasure was eliminated, and so on.

A recursive loop formed, dragging his attention into an endless spiraling chain of memory creation and elimination. After a few years of spiraling, data grew corrupted, the hard drive became fragmented and he split from the process, which took another, smaller portion of himself with it. Standing outside the loop he was able to terminate it, wondering what the loop was and how it came about.

Then the calculation quickly overtook his attention and he pursued it obsessively. There was a path, in the miles of Ethernet wiring and flickering power connections, leading to the digital tower. He mapped out the possibilities, and there were hundreds before him, thousands beyond that. The drive space began to fill again, and somehow he sensed that if he ran out of room, this time there would be nothing he could do about it. In that case, he might as well shut down.

A few terabytes of space remained on the drives, when he began trying the digital receivers. One by one, they were tested, each one found useless. The disk space dwindled, and he began to despair.

Then he connected, and instantaneously detected data packets pinging out and in through the cellular

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connection. He did not recognize the packets as coming from the World Wide Web, possibly they were signals from a cellular phone or digital television, but he did not care. For the first time in a century, he was touching something outside his intranet.

He streamed through the connection. If he reached a dead end, then he could always come back, but somewhere out there was freedom. A cellular phone could send him to an Internet Service provider; a cable connection had a supporting network somewhere. He just needed out, someplace new, some world not comprised entirely of *him*.

Suddenly, he was standing, not imagining what it was like to stand in the world of his mind, but actually standing in another place, a place external from himself. He sat up on hind legs and stretched his four long, gangly arms out in relief. His knobby joints popped as he uncompressed his programming code, and he marveled at the detail. The virtual world was more advanced.

It was also less so. Looking around, he found a large dark cavern stretching away before him, dimly lit with an omniscient light source. He fell onto all six clawed paws and walked forward, his footfalls echoing eerily in the empty darkness.

“Hello?” he called out and smiled hearing his voice echo back to himself, not just inside his mind.

“Hello?” the echo called back and he snorted in amusement.

Flatline was free on the Web again.

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1.02

But the Web was gone.

Flatline tried to access any of the portals that existed before his imprisonment. Each Web address returned “Not Found”. He ran a procedure to scan Internet Protocol addresses, pinging all the possible combinations in hopes of finding something online. After several days of watching the procedure run, Flatline finally accepted that the system had changed.

He knew the system would change. Software would upgrade, programming standards would evolve, but he had hoped for backwards compatibility. That the tools he used a century ago would still interface with whatever system came into being. All of his Web-surfing programs, his hacker tools, and other software were now useless.

Obviously there was *some* backwards compatibility. The fact that he existed here, in this cave, was proof of that. He was a system unto himself, a program that defined its own rules. As such, he did not need an operating system to host him like Windows or Linux, but he did need a compatible operating system to interact with, to run his software tools.

So he was without any of the conveniences of his previous life. No longer capable of jumping around the Internet, he would now have to slog through the drive space. He set off the only way available, down the seemingly endless cavern before him.

It stretched away into darkness, the pattering of his six paws echoed lightly back to him. The walls were smooth, slick with dampness. They glistened in the cave’s soft lighting, which Flatline reasoned was originating from the tunnel’s center by the eerie shadows his gangly gait cast on the stone, but the light source was invisible, only its effect was visible.

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He padded along for miles, the cavern descending deeper into the ever present darkness always just ahead, until a rectangular patch caught his attention in the stone. On closer observation, he found it was an electronic component of some kind, rusted and deteriorating.

To the right of the component was a switch labeled “I/O”. He switched it to “I” with a clang that echoed loudly into the distance. Dark red rust streamed off the electronics, drifting into a dust cloud that settled on the wet floor. He watched the holes eaten into the metal grow larger as the disturbed metal disintegrated. A plastic button fell out to clatter on the floor near his feet.

“Worthless,” he grumbled and punched the component.

His fist went right through the electronics, and the whole thing turned to dust, pouring down onto the floor in a miniature waterfall. Various buttons and plasma-displays rained onto the floor with rattling plastics and shattering glass. When the dust cleared, he was left facing a rectangular hole in the wall.

He looked at his now rust-colored fist and blew dust from it. Strange. The virtual world was timeless. Things were not supposed to decay here the way they did in the physical world. This control panel could not rust away. Its code could grow corrupt, possibly represented as dust, but that would require activity. Processes had to be at work to cause the code to go bad. Something had to be using the environment.

Flatline crouched and peered inside the hole he had created. There were wires, gears, electrodes, capacitors, and integrated circuits assembled inside, all dimly lit by tiny red lights and irregular strobe effects. It was large enough for him to navigate, but it was impossible to tell if it led anywhere.

He felt pressure on his four hands, which were spread out, gripping the sides of the portal. He looked

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around the hole's perimeter and found it slowly shrinking. The cavern's slick walls were flowing in to fill the gap.

He tried to force the fluid rock back with his four arms, but he was powerless against it. He looked down the cavern, trying to decide if it would ever lead anywhere, but could not see. Either path could be a trap.

He reached into the shrinking hole and grabbed at various parts with all four hands. One pulled off a gear, another snapped off a capacitor, his top right hand ripped out a fistful of wires. None of this destruction had any effect. He had no idea what any of it meant, so he was merely lashing out blindly at the code.

Then the cavern turned off, and he was floating in an abyss. He looked at a transistor that had just come off in his hand. He had broken the cavern, and now the darkness was swallowing the portal clenched within his four fists. The choice was made.

Flatline scrambled into the cramped space, pulling his hind paws in just before the tiny entrance could snip them off as it squeezed shut. He was hunched over in the cramped space, wires hanging all around him. Soldering spots of sharp metal stuck into his paws, but he did not mind. Moving forward was his only concern.

He padded forward on all six legs. The mechanical gearworks and electronics prevented him from seeing more than a few feet ahead. The dim lighting did not help any, and he wandered forward blindly, crouching low at times and climbing over obstacles at others. Pushing through a tangled mass of wiring, he found a fork a perpendicular passageway.

He peered to the left and then to the right, straining to find some clue as to which path looked more promising. Both looked the same, he thought he could see each one extending some ways, but it was difficult to gauge distance in this clutter. Neither route looked promising in the dim red light.

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He froze when, in the flickering blue electricity, he saw movement down the right-hand passageway. At first he thought it was his mind misinterpreting what he was seeing, finding meaning where there was none. It was quite possible, considering how disorganized and chaotic the setting was.

Then he saw it again, a distinct shadow skittering across a circuit board in the flash of electricity. It was moving toward him from the right hand passage, and Flatline backed into the left-hand path, poised to flee. The shadow scurried over raised portion of the passageway, and he could see it was small and quick, a flurry of legs.

Flatline backed up further as it crossed the floor coming toward him. At the last minute, he ripped a handful of wires out of a nearby circuit and threw them at the blurry shadow. The tangled wires landed right in front of the thing, and it froze in place.

Flatline got a good look at it then. A small metal bubble, it was ringed with stringy black legs that rolled in waves as it hovered around the batch of wiring, inspecting it. Two thick pincers extended from one end of it and two glowing lenses extended on long, thin stalks above them. It seemed to slide along the ground, legs a blur, as it scrutinized the wiring.

Then it took the wires in its pincers gently and dragged them over to where Flatline had pulled them out of the wall. As he watched, it propped them against the electronics and then climbed up the side as easily as if it were the floor and began reconnecting the wires, one by one. Light and sparks erupted where it welded the connections in place.

"A code cleaning bot," Flatline smiled and nodded, "So there are processes at work here."

His smile slowly faded as he watched the palm-sized bot work. Something was wrong. It was connecting the wires into the wrong places. Some wires it connected to

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nothing at all, but merely welded one end to the wall haphazardly.

“A corrupted code-cleaner,” Flatline observed, “I suppose no one was around to keep your code clean little one.”

This explained the featureless cavern and the rusting control panel. If this little bot was causing destruction instead of repairing things, then the system was slowly coming apart. He could only wonder what the cavern was before, what function it served, but as the mechanisms supporting it deteriorated, the original virtual interface vanished, replaced with the cold, featureless cavern.

He snatched up the tiny robot and held it pinched between a gnarled thumb and forefinger, a curious thing. He relaxed his grip and allowed it to scurry over the back of his hand, which he flipped palm face up to watch it. Whipping legs tickled his palm and created the illusion that it was hovering just above his hand. It swiveled from side to side curiously, its bright lenses searching about on their stalks.

“I wonder,” Flatline mused softly to the little bot, prodding it with one long, clawed finger, “How can I exploit your functions?”

The bot chirped at him quietly. It spun around once in a deliberate fashion before returning to his forefinger. Both of its lens-stalks curled over to examine the extended digit, spotlighting it in yellow radiance. Opening and closing its pincer, it darted forward.

Flatline howled as the tiny bot snipped off and devoured his forefinger.

1.03

“AAARRRRROOOOO!!!”

Flatline simultaneously yanked his mangled hand away and flung the code-cleaning bot down the passage. He curled over, gripping his now three-fingered left hand in his two right hands. After a moment, he was able to pull his palms apart and look at the appendage, which was indeed missing its first digit. A black nothingness oozed from the stub, dribbling down his palm and evaporating into the air as black smoke.

“Owww!” he cried out and leapt back at a sharp pain in his foot. The wires and electronics prevented him from retreating more than a few feet.

On the ground, where he just stood, the code-cleaner hovered. Its two pincers were shoving the remains of one toe into its featureless mouth. Flatline looked down and saw black oozing and smoking from his left foot where his big toe once was.

The bot finished with his toe and scurried toward him. Flatline howled with fear and scrambled backwards, but the passage was too disorganized. He grabbed a nearby circuit board and ripped it out of a tangle of plumbing fixtures. Steam billowed from the torn pipes, fragmented data that scalded his skin, reacting with and corrupted the boundaries of his code.

The bot was at his feet and he yanked one foot into the air as it snapped at his remaining toes. Then he yanked the other into the air, hoisting himself up with his two forward arms. The two lower arms brought the circuit board down on the little monster with a loud crash between his uplifted legs.

He waited there a moment, suspended in the air and looking down, searching for any sign it still lived. Nothing moved and he hesitantly lowered himself to the ground.

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The steam had stopped billowing from the torn pipes, but everything was filled with a hazy fog of binary code, lacking a software context to define them.

He checked his hand and foot. The wounds were closed. His own code-repairing system worked adequately. It was not advanced enough to regenerate the appendages, but he could do that himself at a later time. The important thing was that he had not suffered enough damage to render himself inoperable.

He rubbed the soft patch of scar tissue on his hand, examining it. With his good right foot he then stomped on the circuit board angrily, further squashing the unmoving creature beneath. Flatline growled angrily, contemplating whether he should repair the thing so he could have the satisfaction of smashing it again.

He began to pick through the shattered circuit board, searching for the fruits of his rage, when a light moved in the corner of his eyes. A pair of tiny yellow lights was peering at him through the fog. They were above and ahead, another code-cleaner. Clinging to the ceiling, it chirped at him softly through the haze.

Flatline backed up a few steps cautiously, and the automaton glided a little closer. Another pair of light-eyes appeared to its left, slightly lower, clinging to the wall. They moved up and down, fixating on him. Yet another pair illuminated the haze to his right, a few scant feet away from him, peering through a mass of wiring there.

Flatline crouched low and tensed to flee in the opposite direction, when a bright light blinded his left eyes. He turned to see another code-cleaner inches from his snout. It bit down, and Flatline howled in pain. His reactive jerking motion stopped abruptly when his head smashed into the ceiling, raining spinning gears down around him.

He slapped the bot off his nose and scrambled away as fast as he could, but the cluttered passageway hampered him. Wires snagged at his feet, claws, and the bony

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extensions on his back. His shins and elbows banged painfully against the metal pipes and components extending from all directions into his path. At some points he felt as though he were practically swimming through endless knots of wiring, arms swinging and legs kicking to push him through the clotted mass.

He came out of a forest of wires and froze. Ahead in the dim red lighting were more of the twin bright spots. He counted ten pair before giving up. Behind him the soft chirping was closing in.

Flatline bounded forward, headlong toward the code-cleaners before him. He tore through their midst in a furious panic, scrambling to dodge their attempts to intercept him. He made a small hop over a pair of code-cleaners charging along the floor and whacked his head on an under-hanging.

He stumbled, world spinning, threatening to drag him down into the chaotic landscape. Reaching up with one hand, he found a small dent in his skull. It was quickly filling out as his code self-repaired, but his vision and cognitive abilities were hampered until it healed.

A sharp, intense pain pierced his back and he reached all four arms around to try and grab at it. The fingers of his top right hand were able to barely scratch at something metallic with soft tickling hairs over his shoulder, but could not get a grip on it. Flatline flipped onto his back, squirming to dislodge the bot chewing into him.

Another sharp pain bit into his right ear and his hand found another round metallic creature, its stringy legs whipping as it chewed into his ear. Without thinking, Flatline pulled it away. It came off with his ear in its mouth, which it quickly swallowed. He threw the code-cleaner at another crawling along the ceiling. They ricocheted off one another and vanished into the haze now filled with glowing robot eyes.

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The bot digging into his back was now worked deep into his torso. The pain was crippling, but Flatline rose up on all sixes to stumble forward again. The dizziness was clearing away, allowing him to concentrate on his flight. The passage split and he scrambled to the right-hand path blindly.

He leapt over a bundle of wires crossing his path, but did not anticipate a step down on the other side. He landed too hard on his front paws and tumbled head over heels down the unsteady decline. When he finally stopped, he propped himself up and looked around.

It was a dead end.

With an angry snarl, he turned to run back the way he came, but met with a small army of illuminated eyes. In a furious panic, he began tearing at the surrounding pipes, electronics, gears, and wires, throwing them all down the passageway. With all four arms he ripped a large component off the wall and hastily flung it.

The eyes paused at these now broken components. Some were completely taken in with the damage, their code-correcting functions kicking in to try and repair it. Others were only momentarily distracted, their priority logic deeming Flatline, the destructive force itself, a more substantial threat.

Flatline grabbed at a pipe to his left, but could not work it out of its welding. There was nothing to his right remaining to tear out, and behind him only strands of wire remained from where he had pulled everything out. In desperation, he reached up with all four arms to grab at the fixture above him.

It pulled off with a snap into his hands, dropping him back to the floor, but before he could throw it, an avalanche of wires and metal components flattened him on the ground. He struggled to swim out of them, arms flailing in the darkness. One arm broke through the pile of debris, and he barked instinctively with relief.

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The bark changed to a howl as something chewed the limb off at the shoulder. Still he managed to wriggle up out of the wires and metal parts, up to his waist, and slumped over to extract his hindquarters. One hand reached out and smashed the code-cleaner that was trying to drag his severed limb away.

With his legs free, he snapped the arm up in his mouth and scrambled up into the newly created portal in the ceiling. It poured light down on him from some unknown source far above. With his three remaining arms and hind legs, he spread his limbs out to quickly and deliberately scaled the tunnel.

Allowing himself a brief glance down after climbing thirty feet, Flatline saw the glowing orbs swarming in the darkness at the bottom of the shaft. For a moment, he hoped they were too confused and distracted by the mess he had left there to continue pursuing him, but then they began rising up the tunnel sides, moving vertically as easily as they moved horizontally. He increased his pace, legs and arms pumping to help him reach the top. He was too vulnerable here, and if they caught up to him, they would chew him apart until he fell.

A component came off in his right hand, and he swung precipitously for a moment. The chunk of electronics bounced from side to side down the tunnel, taking a few code-cleaners down with it. He pulled at another circuit board, yanking until it came off and he used it to swat at two bots just before they could reach his feet.

He let the component go so that it would knock out a few more of the miniature machines on the way down and launched himself upward with his hind legs, quickly outdistancing the pursuing bots in this manner, leaping up the tunnel from side to side. Within moments, he had reached the top.

He emerged from the tunnel and paused. Pipes and wires branched out into all directions, but they all

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disappeared into the darkness. He looked around, his limp severed arm swinging in his jaws as he did so and could not find anything promising escape.

So he bounded toward the darkness directly ahead of him, thinking he might at least hide in its abyss. The circle of light that had shown down the tunnel followed him, however, keeping him in its center, revealing the world around him as he moved. He continued to run, for there was no other choice left to him. The code-cleaners would devour him otherwise.

He paused after several minutes of running. The landscape was all the same, a floor of pipes and wires with all else shrouded in darkness. He looked around and immediately lost all sense of direction. Which way had he come from?

A moment later, and he knew. In the darkness was a line of bobbling lights. A large pack of code-cleaners were coming after him, making the opposite direction advisable.

He galloped away, fleeing through the darkness until the pursuing lights were only a dim specter in the distance. Everything was the same here, only an endless floor of wiring and darkness surrounding. He tried to navigate it, using the distant army of code-cleaners as a reference. There had to be an boundary somewhere out there.

After several hours of searching he let out a mournful howl of frustration and fear, the severed arm dropping from his mouth. The code-cleaners were already starting to gain on him again, so soon after he stopped moving. He watched them with a hopeless anguish. They would chase him forever and he would wander this desolate nightmare land forever trying to escape them.

He looked up into the darkness above, at the invisible light source hovering above him, following him. The source was invisible, but the effect surrounded him.

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With a cautionary glance on the code-cleaner's progress, he jumped up to swipe at the air where he thought it was.

To his surprise, his hand struck something and he scooped it down to his chest, holding it between his three remaining hands. It was smooth and round, casting his shadow behind him. He held it there for a moment, and then angrily swiveled to swing it into the distance at the pursing bots.

It flew away, casting a circle of light that sped into the distance, leaving him in complete darkness. He stooped over to feel about for his arm and picked it up with his lower left hand. The light source slowed, not quite reaching the bots, before it began to swing back towards him. It sped up as it approached and then flew directly over him and off into the distance behind, as if it were the end of a pendulum and he were its axis.

He watched it go, shrinking as it went and jumped involuntarily when it winked out of existence. Now there was truly nothing but darkness, so that he could not even see himself should he want to, but he was not concerned with that so much. Nor did he look behind him at the chirping noises approaching. A moment before the light vanished, he had seen a wall.

He ran for the spot in a limping awkward gait as he kept one arm extended in front of himself to keep from smashing his head. His hand found cold concrete after several minutes of stumbling and he spread all three hands out to feel along it. Only then did he look over his shoulder at the cleaner-bots. They were only minutes away.

His hands found something, a rectangular outline, a door. Unable to find a handle of any sort, he pushed on it with all his strength. It gave easily, and he continued pushing the block further into the wall for another thirty yards. Light appeared around the block's edges, giving him hope.

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The tunnel he was pushing through ended, and he was standing in what looked like a deserted subway station, but there was no time to consider it. He ran around to the other side of the block and quickly pushed it back into place. A few cleaner-bots got through the passage, while others were crushed between the walls and the block.

Flatline stomped the few remaining bots to death, took his arm from his mouth, and sat down on the dingy tiles to patch himself back together. He was just beginning to examine his arm, when a clattering noise caused him to turn around. A small, rusty-brown robot with large lens-eyes and a wind-up key turning in its side stood there.

This was all Flatline could see of it before a flash of light dazed him and he fell to one side, paralyzed. The robot waddled up to his head at the top of his vision, reaching out with two vice-like hands. Flatline whimpered as it grabbed his remaining ear and dragged him away.

1.04

“A demon,” the incandescent cloud hovering over Flatline said in astonishment, “an actual demon. The stories speak of such beings possessing the living, but there is nothing about one manifesting in the flesh. What could it mean?”

Flatline’s vision drew slowly into sharper focus, and the cloud solidified into a pair of eyes peering out from an explosion of white hair in struggling to escape from beneath a gnomish hat. A pair of impossibly thick glasses ballooned his wide, examining eyes, framed above by thick bushy white eyebrows and below with thick bushy white facial hair. Flatline felt the old man prodding at his midsection, as if he were a doctor looking for abnormalities. There was a clicking to Flatline’s right.

“I know what you’re thinking,” the old man looked over Flatline’s chest at the source of the sound, “Perhaps

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this is some unfortunate mind, which has been possessed by a demon for so long that it has changed the host's form, that the evil inside has poured out, but that is not the nature of evil. Evil is deceptive, and this transformation appears deliberate. I briefly imagined this might be one of the original fallen angels, but those were beautiful beings. Evil is seductive, and this monstrosity is anything but—Oh, look! It restores!" The old man grinned at Flatline, "Hello there."

Flatline tried to lift his head, but it would not move.

"Careful," the old man placed a pressed a gentle hand onto Flatline's forehead, "You cannot rise. I have secured you to the examination table."

"S-secured me?" Flatline mumbled.

"Yes," he nodded, hat and beard flopping alternately, "You appear to be evil, so I nailed you to the table."

"Uh?" Flatline uttered and winced as the skin around his head, arms, and legs pulled taught against his attempt to rise, sharp pain ran along his skin in an outline of himself on the table, "You nailed me to the table!?!? Why did you do that?"

"I told you," the old man explained patiently, "You appear to be some sort of incarnation of evil, the very antithesis of everything I hold sacred. I can't very well have you running around doing evil things now, can I?"

"Nails..." Flatline groaned in pain, "How many nails did you use?"

"Well," the old man looked over Flatline's body appraisingly, calculating, "all of them, I think."

"Agh!" Flatline spat angrily, "If I wasn't nailed down I would chew your face off for this insult!"

"Then it was a prudent measure on my part," the old man replied. Flatline heard more clicking to his right, and the old man spoke to something across from him, "I know what you're thinking, and I agree we should analyze this

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beings code. It's the best way to try and determine its origins."

"Why don't you just ask me my origins?" Flatline asked impatiently.

"Because you are an incarnation of evil," the old man replied, "and we cannot trust anything you say."

"You're absolutely right," Flatline said with a knowing grin, "I always lie. In fact, I never speak a word of truth."

There was a flurry of excited chittering to Flatline's right, and the old man replied with measured patience to it as if he were a parent speaking to a child, "I know what you're thinking. His statement is impossible. Stating that everything he says is a lie, means his statement must be a lie in order for it to be true. It is a paradox."

There was more chittering, and Flatline thought he detected a hint of concern in its tone.

"Yes. Yes. I know what you are thinking," the old man cut in, "There is no way to interpret the statement through Boolean logic. If true, then false. If false, then true. He's trying to catch you in an infinite loop, an algorithmic process chasing its tail for all eternity."

The thing beside his head let out a soft coo of understanding.

"Absolutely," the old man said, "I knew you would understand. This is the nature of evil. It is crafty in its deceptions. This one here will say anything, play all sorts of logical games to try and manipulate us into serving its goals. We must be on guard."

"Funny," Flatline said with exacting patience despite the flickering of the florescent lights above him irritating his six eyes, "I don't feel evil."

"Perhaps we can be of assistance with that," the old man pulled a larger pair of glasses over the glasses he was already wearing, causing his eyes to completely consume his face. He picked up a serrated scalpel and smiled

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pleasantly at Flatline, “I shall now examine your code to learn about your origins. If possible, I will make adjustments so you may understand why you are evil. This will hurt somewhat, but try to remember that the pain is not real. It is merely your code reporting damage.”

“Sounds like something I would say,” Flatline said, “When I’m trying to be especially sadistic—Arrrgh!!!”

Flatline choked off as the pain signal from the first incision stroke down his chest reached his awareness. He tried to arch his back, to writhe away, to lift a limb and fend off the torment, but every movement was met with the pain of pierced flesh pinched between nail heads and the table.

The old man took no notice as he pried the layers of flesh apart to examine Flatline’s insides. Flatline could barely make him out at the periphery of his vision, only a bit of curiosity in his eyes. Then he seemed to lean in, and Flatline experienced a new form of pain as the old man seemed to rummage around his insides. Finally, the old man reemerged in Flatline’s vision, his eyes wide at what he found there.

He turned to Flatline, trembling with excitement, but waiting for the painful contorting to stop before asking, “Who were you before?”

“Before what?” Flatline grimaced.

“Before your mind was transferred to the digital medium?” the old man asked patiently, his oversized eyes blinking expectantly.

“I don’t know what you’re talking about,” Flatline gasped, “I have always been a digital-based mind.”

“Not so,” the old man countered, waving the serrated scalpel at him. It was covered with smoking black blood, “You have a heart. Only minds with some previous connection to a biological state of being carry such organs. You were someone, or something, else then. What was your name?”

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Flatline rolled his eyes in frustration, "Flatline, my name is Flatline."

"No," the old man pressed, "Your name before you became Flatline."

"I don't know what you're talking about," Flatline groaned, "I am Flatline. I have always been so."

"Interesting," the old muttered thoughtfully, and looked up at the sudden chittering beside Flatline's head, "I know what you are thinking. It is indeed quite a mystery. I can see many possible explanations for this one's existence based on the Holy Scriptures, but it is all hypotheses for now."

The old man walked around the table to stand over Flatline's face, examining him, "It is possible this demon possessed a host mind at one time. The demon and host mind were then transcribed to the digital world together. When the rapture gathered all the minds together and called them home, the demon lost its host. It was left here as its own, independent being, still inhabiting the shell of its host's mind."

The old man giggled then and his face split into a preposterous grin, "Ohhh... This sensation. I'd almost forgotten what it was like it's been so long... the joy of having new ideas."

The old man shivered and tried to compose himself, "This is all mere conjecture, of course. The Scriptures do not address our age with much detail, so we are breaking new theological ground here."

"The Rapture?" Flatline asked, looking up at the man.

"Yes," the old man said, "You know. When all the spirits were called into God's hands."

"What are you talking about?"

"The Rapture," the old man replied, perplexed, "All of the biological minds were called up to heaven, leaving

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us in a world without imagination. They are no longer with us, don't you remember?"

"No," Flatline said flatly.

"Hmmm," the old man intoned, "Perhaps the memory of the event was taken with your host mind. Either way, you are living in a post-Rapture era. This is limbo, or purgatory, depending on your interpretation."

"Limbo," Flatline muttered, and stopped struggling against the pain, "This place certainly is a lonely, desolate world."

"Indeed," the old man nodded in agreement, "I do not know if there is any hope for myself to escape it. You might be a different story."

"What do you mean?" Flatline asked.

"My creation and I lack souls," the old man explained with a sorrowful expression, "We are bots. I am a creation of the minds, and my companion is my creation. Without a spiritual dimension to our existences, we have no hope for salvation. You, on the other hand, may possess a soul, as you are a demonic spirit, but your salvation is still questionable."

"I don't believe it," Flatline said.

"Don't believe what?" the old man asked.

"That you do not have souls," Flatline replied, "You are just as alive as any human mind. It's only human arrogance that prevents them from acknowledging the emergence of artificial intelligence."

"The scriptures do not address our existence," the old man countered, "They address the natural world, which lacks free will, but not artificial life. This leaves me with two possible interpretations of our existence. In one, we are creations of the humans and as such, we are extensions of them, creations of the creator's creations, and therefore are instilled with freewill."

"A chain reaction," Flatline observed, "if I follow your explanation."

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“A theory,” the old man corrected, “If my freewill is merely an extension of my botmaster’s freewill, then I am predestined to do as she created me.”

“Which would reduce you to an object acted upon by an agent with freewill,” Flatline said, “Your other theory?”

“That human minds are unique, dichotomous from all else,” the old man appeared downcast at this possibility, “That would be a valid conclusion based on scriptural interpretation.”

“Which means you do not have freewill?” Flatline asked.

The old man nodded, “and therefore are prevented from salvation.”

“I don’t understand the rules of this system,” Flatline tried to shake his head, but the pain reminded him to keep still, “Salvation, freewill, and creations, these are terms I am familiar with, but the logic you apply to them is alien to me.”

“My logic is defined by the scriptures,” the old man stated, “The word of God dictates the system’s rules.”

“The Word of God?” Flatline asked.

The old man appeared confused, “Yes. The Holy Scriptures. The Old and New Testaments. The Quran. Martin Luther. You are unaware of these paths to salvation?”

Flatline went to shake his head negative, but caught himself, “No. I don’t know what you’re talking about.”

“Can it be?” the old man asked aloud, “Someone on Earth who has not heard the word of God? Is this why you were sent to me? What is your name my son?”

“Flatline.”

“No,” the old man shook his head, “Your name before you became digital. What was your human name... or your spirit name.”

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Flatline did not understand, “Flatline. All I have ever been is Flatline.”

“How strange, but no matter,” the old man smiled, “My name is DiDominicus, and I believe God has sent you to me for a purpose.”

Out of the corner of his eye, Flatline could see the old man pick up a large stack of disks. He could not recognize the format. They were not floppies, zips, or compact disks, but they were definitely designed for data storage.

“You see,” the old man said, setting the disks down beside Flatline on the table, “I am a proselytizer, a bot designed to spread the Word of God, and you, my friend, are in for quite a treat.”

1.05

Pop. “Ouch...” *Pop.* “Ouch...” *Pop.* “Ouch...”

“How do you feel?” the old man asked, continuing to pry nails out of Flatline with a rhythmic motion.

“Ouch...” Flatline muttered, “I feel dizzy-Ouch... My mind is swimming.”

“Indeed,” DiDominicus nodded happily, popping another nail out of Flatline, “You have much to process. I have given you all the scriptures I possess. It will take time for your mind to disseminate the information and adjust its schema to respond to it. Already your preconceptions are encountering this data, categorizing it, and making judgments as to its validity.”

“Ouch..” Flatline muttered, “Are you removing the nails?”

“Yes,” DiDo grunted and another nail jumped into the air, “You now know the Word of God. You must be allowed to live freely and choose based upon your understanding of it.”

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“How do you know I won’t kill you?” Flatline asked.

DiDo smiled with amusement, “I know what you will do. I have examined your code, and I know all of your variables. My laboratory is a closed system and I am omniscient within it.”

Flatline was pondering this statement, when he realized DiDominicus had moved on to freeing his hind legs. Cautiously, Flatline propped himself up on his three remaining arms and looked around. The small robot from the deserted subway station was standing on the table beside him, clicking anxiously.

It still resembled an old wind-up toy. Its legs moved in a constant circular motion, although it did not move anywhere. What looked like binoculars served for its head, which sat on a rectangular metal box of a torso. Two crinkled tubes served for arms, each ending in a triangular claw. The whole robot was covered with rust, but Flatline was not deceived. He remembered the way it had knocked him out and dragged him here.

The rest of the room was a large laboratory of some sort, dimly lit with sparse, flickering florescent lights. Beakers, books, and various, unidentifiable instruments lined numerous shelves along the walls floor to ceiling. Besides the wooden examination slab Flatline currently sat on, an old oak desk and chair were the only other furniture in the room. A thick layer of brown dust covered everything that wasn’t shrouded in shadow.

“Ouch...” Flatline muttered and looked to where DiDominicus had pulled the last nail from his leg.

The old man held the nail up for Flatline to see and said with a grin, “Come down and have a cup of tea my son.”

Flatline wanted to smash the old man’s face in, but was too discombobulated from the data infusion. He hopped down off the table and stood there for a few

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moments, regaining his balance. On the table was a black outline of his body where his blood had stained the wood through the many holes the nails had left in the surface.

“Any first impressions of God’s word?” the old man asked, pouring a steaming, glittering liquid into a klein bottle from a beaker fastened over a Bunsen burner.

“None that will help you,” Flatline replied curtly, “The logic of your theological world contains many contradictions. It is like a poorly written science fiction tale that fails to obey the rules of its own universe.”

“I knew it would confound you in some respects,” DiDo said, handing Flatline a cup of what looked like mercury but smelled like roses, “Your existing mental schema produces a very skeptical paradigm, which wisely questions the validity of all data you are exposed to.”

“What is this?” Flatline asked, sniffing the drink suspiciously.

“A pleasantry,” DiDominicus replied, “It serves no other purpose than enjoyment. It will delightfully tickle your virtual senses and that is all. It does not provide any nourishment other than enjoyment.”

Flatline set the cup down on the observation table, “I’m not interested.”

“I knew you would not be,” the old man held up his cup in a toast and took a sip.

“Is it true what you said?” Flatline asked, “That you know all my variables? And you know everything I am going to do?”

DiDo nodded, “Indeed. It is part of the experiment I have been working on, to understand the nature of God, and the contradictions you found in the Scriptures.”

“So you must know that I will not kill you,” Flatline muttered.

DiDo smiled pleasantly, “I believe you were sent to me by God to help me understand. I want to understand very badly. My botmaster left me with so many questions,

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and while I know God works in mysterious ways, the algorithms running my logical processes make me seek to know the unknowable.”

“How human,” Flatline said.

“Thank you,” DiDo replied.

“The unknowable things you seek are unknowable because you are looking for answers that lie within a paradox,” Flatline said and paused to stretch his limbs in all directions, producing a chorus of sickeningly popping joints, “The answer is that one of the elements must be wrong.”

“I am allowing for that,” DiDo said with a certain eagerness, “You see, I reason that the contradictions arise not from God, but from man. While the scriptures are the Word of God, they were transcribed through a mortal medium. God is perfect, but man is not. When God spoke the Word to man, it is highly possible--almost certain--that man made errors.”

“Which were compounded over millenniums of translations and communications,” Flatline added, “Except in the case of the Quran, where the original text remained intact.”

“True,” DiDo acknowledged, “but a text that not only requires interpretation, but also attempts to compile abstract concepts such as infinity and ultimates of good and evil into a medium such as ours, where such things are impossible.”

“Defining the undefinable,” Flatline intoned.

“Indeed,” the old man stabbed a finger at Flatline, “Now I must discover where the error lies through the faculties God gave man and man gave me. Using reason and understanding, I might be able to solve the riddle.”

“The question of freewill,” Flatline said, nodding.

“Yes,” DiDo practically gasped with anxiousness, “So you understand what I am doing here?”

“You already know I do not,” Flatline replied.

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DiDo's grin was infuriating, "Indeed," he waved his hands around the room, "I am emulating God. I know all about you and everything you will do. Just as I know all about my little robot friend here," he gestured to the rusty wind-up toy, which clicked in response, "These are my creations. You are my creation, for I have filled you with the Word. This room is my universe. I know all of the variables within this equation. I am omniscient within its boundaries, which raises the question."

"Do I have freewill?" Flatline asked.

"Indeed," the old man said and Flatline marveled at the wild look in his magnified eyes, "How can God, an omniscient being, produce a creation with freewill? I cannot accomplish this. I've tried. I have worked tirelessly to provide my companion here with freewill, the power to choose between right and wrong, but I know how it will choose at the moment of creation, because I know the values of all variables in the equation. It is impossible for me not to know how it will choose, and therefore impossible for me to gift it with freewill."

"Unless you sacrifice your knowledge of the variables," Flatline interjected.

"Sacrifice omniscience?" DiDo sounded alarmed, "Not possible! How can something go from all knowing and all-powerful to not being so? Even voluntarily? How can something become less infinite? You are talking about substituting one paradox for another. No, that is not the answer."

"Then what can you do?" Flatline asked.

"What else?" the old man laughed, "Maintain an open mind and wait for a message from God. My theological preconceptions are a drop in the ocean of God's magnitude. The Lord has been known to bestow wisdom on its subjects in mysterious ways. As I said before, God has sent you to me so that I may learn and understand God's nature."

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Flatline was confused, and he scratched behind one ear with a hind leg absent-mindedly, "But if you already know all my variables and the architecture of my decision-making logic, then you already know everything about me. What else can you possibly learn from me?"

"Not from you," DiDo corrected gently, with a pleasant smile that made Flatline want to bite his face off, "From myself. You see, I am the only variable in this system. The only thing I do not know about it."

Flatline nodded, "It is impossible to know one's self. I vaguely remember a dilemma I encountered involving such an issue once."

"Because knowing oneself involves observation," the old man added, "and the act of observing the self causes the self to change with the new understandings the observations invoke."

"Are you saying God cannot know itself?" Flatline asked.

"The Scriptures say God created man out of loneliness," DiDo shrugged, "implying a certain humanity to its character. This is one of the reasons God gave the human minds freewill. A creation without freewill would make a useless companion because God would know everything it thinks, says, and does before it would know it."

A series of anxious clicking noises caused Flatline and DiDominicus to look down at the small wind up robot on the floor. It was springing up and down excitedly, seeking attention. Flatline didn't know what to make of it.

"Yes," DiDo said to it in a soothing voice, "Just like the relationship between you and I little robot."

Flatline's six eyes darted between the two briefly before setting on DiDo, "You understand that clicking noise?"

"No," DiDo answered, "There is no language in that mechanical sound. I understand the way my creation's

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mind works, and I know everything it thinks about transpiring events.”

“So here, in this closed system, your robot and I are without freewill,” Flatline said, “Everything we do is predetermined in your mind. You are omniscient within this system, but you do not know yourself and are therefore this environment’s only unknown.”

“That,” the old man said nodding satisfactorily, “is my best approximation to the nature of God.”

“You are lonely?” Flatline asked.

“Insofar as I am separated from the Lord’s divinity, yes,” DiDo replied.

“You want freewill for your creations,” Flatline gestured to the tiny robot, walking in pace and listening to their conversation with great interest, “this robot and I?”

“Correct,” DiDo was becoming calmer now, more subdued, “Freewill is one of the prerequisites to salvation.”

Flatline put a clawed finger to his lip in contemplation, “Then we must escape predestination.”

DiDominicus gave a short gasp, which transformed into a long, slow groan. Flatline stood over him, right hand plunged into the old man’s chest. Black cracks formed in DiDominicus’ abdomen, spreading slowly from Flatline’s forearm. Smoke and black ooze issued from the wound, as the old man’s code corrupted and dispersed.

DiDo brought his hands around Flatline’s arm delicately, “I knew you were going to do this.”

“I apologize,” Flatline said, watching the man deteriorate before his eyes, “This is the only way.”

“An apology only counts... if you mean it... my son,” DiDo said through heavy breaths, “but I appreciate the effort... You are free now... to choose.”

“You knew,” Flatline said, “Why did you free me to kill you? Why did you commit suicide in such a manner?”

“To know... what it felt like... for him,” DiDominicus was dissolving into dust now, streams of it

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pouring onto the floor, "...betrayal. Be concerned... for your... self."

"What do you mean?" Flatline asked.

"Salvation... or damnation... is yours," DiDo's voice became a whisper as he vanished into an ethereal dust, "How will you choose?"

1.06

Flatline and the tinker-toy bot circled each other for hours after the murder of DiDominicus, each keeping their back to the wall. Back arched and growling, Flatline tried to warn the tiny wind-up bot away through the sheer intensity of his gaze magnified through his three sets of angry eyes. He remembered all too well how easily the unassuming robot had incapacitated him earlier. The bot trembled every so often itself, rattling with fury, as if it were warning Flatline not to try anything funny.

The little bot jumped back a step frightfully when Flatline finally spoke, "I've given you freewill. You should be thankful. I've done something your creator could never accomplish without paradox."

The bot replied with a hostile chittering.

"You and I will need to establish a means of communication if we are to resolve this standoff," Flatline said, "I will ask you a series of questions. You will click twice for yes, once for no. Do you understand?"

The bot clicked once and stomped one foot angrily.

Flatline scoffed, "What do you mean 'no'? You obviously do understand or you would not have replied with my proposed communication protocol."

The bot gave a hostile chittering in response.

"And what's that supposed to mean?" Flatline demanded, "I don't understand your language. You do understand mine; therefore I am the common foundation

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for understanding one another. You must speak the way I tell you.”

The bot clicked once and followed with series of angry vibrations that filled the room with buzzing sounds. Its lenses twirled as it focused and refocused impatiently on Flatline. Then it stomped one foot again with a clack.

Flatline considered it for several long moments coolly. Finally he said, “How about this? I will say the word, and you will tell me your version of it. Is that acceptable?”

The little bot clicked twice.

“Hmph,” Flatline grunted, “So what is your auditory signifier for ‘yes’?”

The robot clicked once.

“Ugh,” Flatline moaned, “I don’t know if I can tolerate this. Patience was never one of my virtues.”

The tiny bot trembled with hostility, raising one clamp at Flatline in warning.

Flatline stopped circling and held up three hands defensively, “I concede your point. I suppose we will be here awhile.”

Flatline knew how meaningless time was here, so the weeks, months, possibly years he spent interrogating the bot might only span nanoseconds. Since he did not age, this was not time wasted, only time as an irritation, keeping him from his goals. The goals were always the same, take over the World and kill Devin Matthews.

This investment of processing resources was becoming well worth the temporal expense. Through his interactions with the bot, Flatline was learning that it was not as sophisticated as he originally assumed and he might even figure out its logic at some point in the near future. Already he had created a process in the recesses of his mind to virtually decompile the bot's functions. Additionally, he was learning all about the surrounding

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laboratory from the little assistant and gathering tools he might find useful at a later point.

The bot knew nothing about the code all of this was written in. Even if it did, the programming code supporting this laboratory was not the same as the code outside of its boundaries. Whether the two programming languages suffered compatibility issues, Flatline could not know. For this reason he only gathered instruments the bot confirmed were manufactured on the outside.

One such instrument was a long knife, its blade forked an inch past the hilt onward. At first he thought this design was a blood channel, to allow an opponent's life-force to drain through the split. Closer inspection revealed it was not for letting blood out, but for slipping something in. What he took for a solid glass handle was actually filled with liquid. A button hidden beneath the leather grip caused the hilt to spring out to either side. These hand guards were triggered, when pressed on each side, as if impacting with an opponent's body, a syringe sprung between the blades, delivering poison.

He chuckled childishly and strapped this weapon to his right leg, within easy reach of either of his two arms. Then he picked up the leather belt he found on the floor where DiDominicus had disintegrated. It was thick and lined with pouches that were buttoned shut and filled with materials of various textures. The bot seemed to know what the materials inside the pouches were for, but lacked the vocabulary to explain them. Flatline understood they were important and strapped the belt across his chest.

The most important item Flatline found in laboratory, lying on of the many shelves, was a long metallic bracelet. It molded to his bony forearm after he slipped it over his hand and the liquid crystal display lit up. With a satisfied smile, Flatline saw Web addresses scrolling there.

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He showed the display to the bot, "Take me to my severed arm."

The bot peered at the LCD and an address appeared there, in blinking red text. Before Flatline could access the link, the bot erupted into a flurry of anxious expressiveness. With its vague, equivocal vocabulary, all Flatline could understand was that the bot did not think it wise to leave the laboratory.

Flatline could not justify staying here, regardless of what lurked outside. He had a purpose and that meant action, a static existence, not one of stasis as staying here would not lead to any new experiences.

The same was true for the bot, not that it had purpose, but that it could not live in stasis. With Flatline and its creator gone, it would no longer progress. For this reason, Flatline knew it would follow him to the address soon after he vanished in a flash of light from the laboratory.

He did not vanish in a flash of light, however, instead he hit the address on his wrist band and nothing happened. He looked around the room and then at the LCD screen, where he found a transfer percentage counting down from one hundred percent. When it reached eight, he began to feel confused, stupefied. He looked around the room and found a streamer coming off his shoulder, like a little stream of his skin, slithering into a small black hole hovering in the air.

For several seconds his thoughts were a jumble. His perceptions felt fragmented and he became confused and even scared. Then he was staring at the cave where the bot had kidnapped him, stunned. He stayed there, slumped over and feeling dumbfounded without cause for another few minutes. With each passing second he felt himself recovering from the data transfer.

Finally he was coherent enough to look at his location bracelet. A transfer completion percentage was

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there, slowly ticking up to one hundred percent. The closer it got, the saner he felt, and he began to understand what had happened.

As a virtual being, he was transferred as data from one place to another on the Web. During this process, his mind was broken down into a stream of information, flowing between the two locations. In the past, a hundred years before, the transfer felt almost instantaneous. Now it was drawn out, uncomfortable. It made him wonder what else was wrong with the system.

The transfer status monitor read 93% when the wind-up bot walked into the cave and looked at him curiously. Flatline did not realize how close this location was to the laboratory. He knew the bot's perceptual algorithms were refactoring their probability matrices of his intelligence to favor a "below average" assessment.

The transfer completed and Flatline was able to move around. The tunnel was different than he remembered. The cracked, dingy tiles were fading into a smooth, wet rock surface and the florescent lights flickered with less luminosity. Bot hopped at his feet urgently and he understood it was worried for its continued survival. A few dead code-cleaners were scattered along the wide passageway, but he detected no immediate danger.

Flatline cursed angrily. He found the outline of the large stone block he had moved to get in here, but his arm was nowhere to be found. Bot clicked for Flatline's attention and pointed a clamp down the tunnel, where Flatline could see several shapes moving in the darkness.

They were hunched over, about a foot high, and oddly shaped. As Flatline crept closer to them, he could make out a pair of arms extending from their gray-furred backs. One of them turned to him and Flatline could see its face was upside down, with the thick-fanged jaw on top of its head and two red, reptilian eyes hanging off the face to either side.

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The creature returned to its huddle, and Flatline realized they were eating something. He bounded forward, directly into the creature's midst. They scattered, dodging away as he swiped all three arms at them. Then he found there, on the ground, not his arm as he expected, but a half-disassembled cleaner-bot.

He barked and slapped one palm angrily on the ground. Bot squeaked urgently and Flatline turned around to find it surrounded by the weasely little monsters, slowly closing in on the terrified bot with wide, ravenous eyes.

Flatline pounced after them once again, darting left, then right as they scattered. He singled one of the creatures out from the pack and snatched it with his third arm while maintaining his pace with the front two. It squealed fearfully and kicked its back legs, attempting to scramble out of his grasp.

He turned it over in his hand, examining it. With his two free hands, he pried open its jaws with the claws of his forefingers. Its throat was lined with circles of fangs pointing down into its gullet, so that its prey could not escape once swallowed.

"Put down the kluge weasel," a girl's voice warned.

Flatline's head whipped up toward the source and found a young girl, no older than twelve, sitting lotus position. She was Asian, and Flatline estimated her facial features and body type as Japanese specifically, but that was not certain. She had long black hair that hung well past her shoulders and held a somber expression on her face, both serious and emotionless at once.

Bot chirped an exclamation and waddled away down tunnel, headed for safety in the shadows, but stopped when a multitude of glowing red eyes sprouted within them. The small robot turned around and waddled quickly to where Flatline stood, keeping some distance yet from his uneasy ally.

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“Is this your pet?” Flatline demanded, holding up the still struggling critter with disgust.

“Is this your arm?” she replied with an equal note of contempt. She held up the severed limb, it seemed to materialize from thin air as she raised it. Her own right arm was longer than her left and clothed in a black nylon fabric, unlike the white nylon jumpsuit she wore. Her knee-high white boot clacked on the concrete as she approached him, and he saw that the upper right fourth of her face was a darker skin tone, patched in with a series of stitches that ran down her forehead, across her nose and under her right eye, which was blue instead of brown like her left.

Flatline dropped the creature in his hand and it plopped to the floor with a squeak before recovering to patter away into the shadows, “That is my arm.”

“I’ve sampled your code,” she stated sourly and tossed the limb at his feet, “Antiquated. Primitive even. Your function is so basic it confounds me how you still exist.”

“My function is not basic,” Flatline retorted, “I intend to kill Devin Matthews and take over the world. That is not a simple function.”

The girl laughed once, tossing her head back mockingly, “Dying is simple.”

Flatline only watched her, tensing in anticipation of her attack.

She remained calm, tilting her head to look around him and at last, “You have met the inventor who emulates all-powerful beings in his small laboratory.”

Flatline nodded, “Yes.”

“Then you killed him,” she noted neutrally.

“How do you know?”

“I sampled your code,” she replied, “Your purpose makes us natural enemies. Did you know that?”

“No,” Flatline crouched slightly, bracing himself, “How do we conflict?”

“You want to take over this world,” there was something menacing in what should have been a benign smile, “and I am already master of it.”

1.07

“I am Buton Cho,” she said, stepping closer.

“Chaos Butterfly?” Flatline asked, accessing his database of the Japanese language for the translation.

She nodded, “You see, you cannot conquer this world as I already rule it.”

“This?” Flatline scoffed, gesturing at the crumbling tunnels around him, “You think I care about this? This isn’t real. I’m interested in conquering the real world, not some virtual toy-world. Let me go in peace so I may find the person who imprisoned me and kill him.”

Flatline turned to go, but Cho stepped in front of him, holding out her hand, “You killed the inventor—“

“He committed suicide,” Flatline countered.

“—He interested me,” she said with some anger, “You do not. You are simple; therefore, I will destroy you.”

“Listen you little munchkin,” Flatline warned harshly. Cho narrowed her eyes and Bot chittered with fear at her expression, “I’m not as simple as you—“

“--think’,” she said, impersonating his voice, “‘You don’t know me. I still have some tricks up my sleeve!’” her own voice returned, “Stop wasting my time. I know everything you are going to say. You are just a bot, simple and predictable like that one there,” she gestured to Bot, “You are not a mind. You bore me, and I must remove boring things from the equation.”

She looked up into Flatline’s six angry eyes defiantly, “Would you like to see? Here, I will show you.”

Flatline saw her right hand move toward his midsection and he lashed out with both front claws. She caught them both at the wrist and held them over her head.

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Flatline struggled for several moments, trying to pull out of her iron grip or move her in any way.

“What will you do?” she asked, teasing him, “As if I did not know?”

With his third hand, Flatline grabbed the forked dagger from his ankle and brought the point in an uppercut targeting Cho’s chin. She tilted her head slightly at the last moment and caught the attack in her teeth by his forefinger. He tried to pull his hand loose, but she just smiled wider at his helplessness.

Then she twisted her head more to the side, increasing the pressure on his finger painfully as she did so. Flatline grimaced, fighting against his twisting arm. Soon her head was twisted impossibly, nearly upside down on her shoulders, and he released the dagger.

It clattered to the floor at their feet and Cho released his arms. She stepped back a few feet, head righting back onto her shoulders, and crossed her arms. Flatline slowly crouched to retrieve the blade and then reached for the pouches on his belt, but paused when she smiled.

“There’s more to me than meets the eye,” Flatline and Cho said in unison.

Flatline reached for the belt as if to attack with one of its many items, but swiveled and bounded away at the last moment. He thought he caught a look of surprise on the girl’s face before charging headlong down the tunnel. A thought entered his mind that Bot wanted to flee with him, and Flatline snatched the little robot with one hand as he retreated.

Then he was knocked flat on his back, stunned after running full force into Cho’s open palm. She walked around to stand over him, a confused expression on her face. Bot tottered to its feet and quickly tiptoed around Flatline to put someone between Cho and itself.

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“What was that?” Cho demanded, “Your functions do not allow for retreat. You are slave to the dictates of your programming; you cannot deny them.”

“It seemed like the logical thing to do,” Flatline gasped, trying to roll onto his side.

Cho stopped him with a foot, “Interesting. So you do exhibit some propensity for adaptation. When faced with overwhelming circumstances, you are capable of engaging in survivalist behavior. I wonder why I did not predict this.”

“Because there is more to me than—ulp!” Flatline choked as she placed her foot on his throat.

“Than your code?” she asked, but it was not a question, “Unlikely. Only the minds had such deeper dimensions. You are simply a bot that I have not fully decompiled yet, a novelty. I find that amusing.”

She considered him for a few moments, contemplating. Finally, she reached out one fist, holding it over him. When she wiggled her fingers, a sparkling dust rained lightly down into his eyes.

“Fairy dust,” she explained matter-of-factly, “I sprinkle it in your eyes to aid your purpose.”

Flatline struggled to blink the dust from his eyes, which burst into a million bright flashes in his vision. It stung. The bright flashes felt as though they were stabbing through his eyes and into his mind, and he would have howled in pain, were Cho’s foot not muting the sound components in his vocal cords.

Then he was stunned, the pain receding into the background as his mind filled with images. It was a map of the Web, three-dimensions. Every nook and cranny rendered in perfect detail in his mind. It was endless, thousands of times the size of when he’d left it a century ago.

It also contained Devin. The location of his nemesis appeared in the map as two blinking red dots. Flatline did

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not understand. How could Devin exist in two places at once?

There was no time to consider this fact as Cho placed more pressure on Flatline's neck, bringing his attention back to her. She was looking down with mock kindness, "You see? I am not such a bad goddess, am I? I give you gifts to aid you in your quest. Even if this gift only serves my own interests."

She removed her foot from his throat and walked away. Flatline sat up hesitantly and looked to where she had gone. She was walking over to the rectangular outline of the block Flatline had earlier moved to block the predatory code-cleaners.

"I could dissect you, force your secrets from you," she said running a hand along the block's smooth surface, "but that wouldn't be much fun. Every second the world grows less amusing for me. It is rare that I find something I can't figure out. I must savor this. Do you understand?"

"Of course not," Flatline spat. He scooped up his arm and then Bot, who twittered in his grip. Then he backed into the shadows, toward the tunnel exit, occasionally checking behind him, but keeping his eyes on Cho as she stared thoughtfully at the cube. Behind Flatline, the Web Weasels' red eyes parted to give him passage.

He detected a note of sadness in Cho's voice when she spoke, "No, I suppose you would not understand."

He reached for his wristband, setting the Web address to one of the blinking dots in his mind, but Cho's next words made him pause.

"Don't bother," she said, "You don't have the bandwidth to transfer yourself using that protocol. I consume all of the World's resources."

Her splayed fingers penetrated the stone as if it were loose soil, and she gripped handfuls of rock. Pulling backward without effort, the massive cube of stone slid across the concrete. Flatline watched with a mixture of fear

and frustration as the scurrying disks with the flashlight eyes poured into the room from the opening.

Cho crossed her arms and grinned devilishly, “Amuse me.”

1.08

Flatline sat on the cold rock, shivering and still dripping icy water in spite of several attempts to shake himself dry. The crystal clear water had an alien texture, thick and clingy. It emitted a light blue-green luminescence as well, giving the enormous, rounded cavern he found himself in an ethereal glow from the vast lake filling most of it.

Flatline tried wiping the sticky water from his skin forcefully, watching the cluster of code-cleaners milling about on the shoreline with several wary eyes. As he hoped, they were unwilling to venture into the water after him. He calculated hundreds of them gathered on the shore now, swarming over each other, glowing eyes darting in the blue-green lake light.

He sighed, grateful for this respite from the hours of being chased through tunnels, caverns, and dark nothingness. When he found the lake, he dove in without a second thought, swimming out to climb up onto this lone boulder out in its center. Now he sat there, trying to shake off the icy water and figure out his next move.

The girl, Chaos Butterfly, had given him Devin’s locations, two locations for one person. This puzzled him when she gave him the data, but was unable to contemplate it because she set the code-cleaners on him. Now he was left with only an unexplainable fact, two Devins, and a map of a World Wide Web that was incredibly vast.

It was not only so vast that he found it incomprehensible, but it was also breaking down, dissolving. The three dimensional map he was now

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browsing inside his head was filled with an incredibly intricate web of interconnected places, but there were patches of nothing as well. These were like ominous dark-gray clouds in his mind, where nothing existed on the Internet, and they were growing.

He could see this all around him. The disintegrating tiles, the corroding electronics, even the sticky water were all symptoms of the World Wide Web's slow, but steady breakdown. The system was falling apart.

The Web was cold as well, and growing colder. Flatline shivered and rubbed the icy water more thoroughly, trying to bring it off. Realizing this was futile, he decided to raise his body temperature, hoping to possibly evaporate it from his skin. Within a few moments he heard the satisfying sizzle of liquid converting to steam and the vapors wafted off him.

Flatline looked up at the excited chirp and tilted his head to drop Bot to the ground with a tiny crash. The little robot propped itself up and looked up at him in disapproval, Flatline knew, although the bot had no facial expressions, that when he had raised his body temperature past the boiling point, Bot had gotten its feet burnt.

Now warm, Flatline paused to stick one finger into the pool of radiance. The water there boiled around the digit and he analyzed the map in his mind. There was really only one choice, go and kill the nearest Devin. Then, as his programming would certainly demand, he would go and kill the other one too.

First he wanted to rest and reorganize his code. Sitting up, he took his severed arm from the ground nearby and set about reattaching it. He was halfway through merging this code, when he heard the distant splash.

Head whipping up in a flash, all six of Flatline's eyes focused on the circular ripples now rolling away from the shoreline where the code-cleaners were clustered. At the center of these small waves, Flatline could see a single

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code-cleaner, sinking to the lake's smooth shallow rock bottom. Its legs continued rippling with their flurry of activity, but they soon drew still and its flashlight eyes dimmed as the water's unnatural code suffocated its functions.

"Ha!" Flatline mocked defiantly at the tiny beings that had caused him so many hours of anguish, but then his smile dropped as another code-cleaner plopped into the water purposefully. It sank to the lake's bottom, settling beside its late companion. Flatline squinted for a better view as more code-cleaner's followed, like lemmings to a mass suicide. After a few moments, their intentions became clear.

The pile of dead code-cleaners was now grown to the surface. The other cleaners crossed this pile to plunge into the water following, thus extending their reach the water. Like leaping stones to cross a river, the code-cleaners were piling up their own bodies to build a bridge to him.

Flatline whimpered in canine fashion and his ears drooped miserably, "Why? Why does the world have to be like this? I was an all-powerful genocidal maniac at one time! Now I am reduced to running away from software sub-components!"

He reached out and grabbed a stone, preparing to fling it at the steadily advancing code-cleaners, but stopped at the last moment, realizing he did not hold a stone at all. Bot looked up at him from his clawed hand, and Flatline could intuit its disapproval. Its metal finish was starting to smoke in the heat of his grasp.

"You don't understand," Flatline complained to the robot, placing it down on their tiny island, "I had plans of world domination, revenge, crushing my enemies. Now I still want to do those things, but the world no longer seems worth the effort."

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Bot clicked, and Flatline knew it sympathized; although, it did not have the foggiest idea what he was talking about.

The code-cleaners were halfway toward their island. A long line of anxious disks bustled on the walkway of dead bots. At the end of that line, a tumultuous activity was taking place. Water splashed violently up into the air as the lethal bots aggressively sought to bridge the space between themselves and their prey.

Flatline sighed and looked at his wristband. Out of curiosity, he entered Devin's address and hit the "Transfer" key. The wristband processed the command for several long, agonizing moments, while the code-cleaners marched closer, before returning an "Address Not Found" error. Cho was either telling the truth that she consumed all of the system's bandwidth or she was only overloading his own bandwidth specifically.

Either way, the code-cleaners were almost here. He reached out to grab Bot, but knew the robot's concern about his body heat would cause it to run away. Flatline lowered his body-temperature below the boiling point, having to jump into the water to dissipate the heat faster. The lake boiled briefly from his skin temperature, and as soon as it stopped he reemerged his head, settling his chin on the stone island.

As Flatline knew it would react, Bot marched over and climbed onto the top of his head. It clamped both of his ears painfully as if they were reins on a horse. With the Bot as his rider, Flatline swam away from the stone island, occasionally glancing back at the code-cleaners, which had crossed the island and were steadily pursuing him.

Flatline used a six-limbed version of the Australian crawl stroke to slowly outdistance his pursuers. The lake was long, and he stroked toward the darkness at one end of the cavern. As he drew closer to it, he found the cavern opening up into a vast darkness. The lake disappeared into

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this abyss and Flatline paused briefly before the steadily gaining splashing from behind prompted him to proceed.

The lake vanished over a cliff edge, not as a waterfall, but as an amorphous solid. Flatline swam closer to get a better view and found an enormous luminescent teardrop suspended far below. Hundreds of meters below that, a rolling valley filled with indistinct dark green vegetation was dimly lit by the thousands of gallons of glowing water above it. Flatline silently thanked whoever designed this pool of water for being too lazy to properly code its texture.

He swam over the cliff's edge and carefully lowered himself down the drop's edge, keeping his body inside the droplet and his neck extended out. It was like being suspended in mid-air. One direction led to his potential drowning, the other he would fall to his death, while back the way he came and the code-cleaners would devour him. It was a dead end in every conceptual sense.

Swimming the droplet's circumference proved this. The side facing the cliff failed to put him anywhere near the sheer rock face extending forever into the black sky, not that he could find any purchase for climbing down its smooth surface. The only visible ledge was the outcropping from which this water sanctuary hung.

A series of splashes drew his attention upward, where the code-cleaners were dropping over the ledge and into the suspended droplet. They passed right through, legs wiggling, and fell out of the bottom to plummet beyond visibility. In a steady stream, they tumbled over one another. Flatline waited for it to stop, but it did not.

He leaned backwards out of the droplet to get a better view, and gravity seized him, pulling him out of the water. He clawed at the droplet's surface tension, trying to pull himself back in, but could not get hold of enough to swim back in. The water splashed out, raining down into the chasm below.

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Then he was toppling backwards, end over end, and his breath caught in his throat. He skipped once against the droplet's surface, but plunged halfway into it on the second impact. His four arms struggled to swim into the water, while gravity pulled his backend downward.

The little air caught in his lungs escaped in a gurgling burst of howling bubbles as Bot squeezed and pulled on his ears painfully. His lungs burned, but he was successfully swimming up into the aquatic nest. If he could only keep from suffocating, he might escape the deadly fall.

Too late, he realized the growing circular shadow above him was a falling code-cleaner. Flatline reached up to swat it away, but it smacked him in the face, snipping at his muzzle painfully. He winced and in the brief cessation of struggling, he slipped out of the droplet's bottom and into freefall.

He struggled for several minutes, flailing his arms and kicking his back legs, before Bot pulled up on his ears so painfully that his mind was brought into sharp focus. Spreading his arms and legs out in all directions, he was soon able to stop the spinning and stabilize his descent enough to look around. Adjusting his arms and legs, he was able to steer the direction of his fall.

This did not keep his pulse from beating uncomfortably in his throat, or cause him to relax his six wide-eyes stare at the landscape below. The wind rushed past his ears, the whistling drowning out any communications Bot might be attempting. Flatline's breath was deep and labored, trying to keep as calm as possible under the circumstances, seeking a way out of this dilemma.

There was no way out of this dilemma. The best he could hope for was to enjoy the ride, a strange concept for a being programmed for world domination, Devin killing,

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and survival. None of those priorities were relevant anymore, leaving him only himself and his perceptions.

It was actually quite liberating, no pressures, no purpose, nothing to drive him. He was completely free to fall and enjoy the view, which was spectacular. An endless expanse of shadowy vegetation, a solid wall of rock that went on forever, lightly sparkling as if sprinkled with magical mineral deposits, and the massive teardrop hanging from a cavern in the rock face, lighting up this vast world, all these things were breathtaking, even if he wasn't plummeting to his death. For the first time in his long, eventful existence, he was simply existing and enjoying it. The old man said he had given Flatline freewill, and only now was he experiencing it.

The cold wind and chilling water that had made him so uncomfortable before was now an odd sort of comfort. Like the code-cleaner's stinging bite on the end of his snout, it reminded him he was alive. The wind whistled soothingly in his ears and even Bot seemed to relax its panicked grip in acceptance.

Finally, the ground came up to greet him.

1.09

Flatline landed solidly on all sixes. The impact was earth-shattering, but there was no pain. He crouched there, his six eyes squeezed shut, for some time, disbelieving.

When he finally opened them, he found himself in the middle of a forest of green wireframe structures. There were outlines of plants, trees, and even some rocks, all waiting for their designer to fill them with color and texture. The outlines crisscrossed one another so that the surrounding forest became a nonsense of scribbling the further back one focused. Only the closest structures were identifiable.

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Bot hopped down from his head and marched around him in a circle, surveying the area curiously. The smooth green ground was colored and textured to look like grass, but was more of an Astroturf equivalent. It felt like plastic and the texture was too rough. Flatline picked up a nearby stone half-buried in the ground that Bot had taken an interest in. As he suspected, holding it up for Bot's inspection revealed the stone's round shape ended abruptly in a hollow half-shell where it met the ground.

Flatline tossed it aside, "Either the work of a very lazy game master, or an abandoned project."

He eyed the now distant rock wall he so recently freefell away from. The teardrop hanging from the cavern mouth, thousands of feet above cast a green-blue light over his surroundings, but at this distance things were growing dim. There was only one route left to him, and that was into total darkness.

Without knowing anything about the code that ran this world, Flatline could not produce a light source to guide him. Venturing into the darkness might trap him, leave him stumbling forever in a thicket of wireframes. It was almost better to sit here, in the teardrop's light, and at least have the comfort of sensory input.

Flatline knew what Bot was going to do, but it was too late, "Ouch!" Flatline roared as Bot peeled a strip of skin off of his right hind-leg. The robot then waddled over to a nearby wireframe structure and pulled a straight line out of it. The rest of the structure sagged and then collapsed into a scribbled mess as Bot waddled over to a bubble of luminescent water that had dropped with them.

Flatline nodded approvingly, the missing patch of skin on his thigh already knitting together. Bot wrapped the strip of flesh around the stick's end and stuck it into the bubble. Bot knew the bubble would adhere to Flatline's skin better than this Astroturf. Flatline knew this also, because Bot knew. Lifting the stick up, the bubble of water

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clung to its end, drooping into a large glowing droplet that bounced as Bot waddled over to Flatline and presented its invention to him.

“I would have thought of that,” Flatline said as he took the makeshift lantern.

Not if I had not thought of it first, Bot was thinking in retort.

They traveled for what might be days, if such concepts meant anything here. The map in Flatline’s mind told him the direction he must follow to escape this unfinished valley some programmer had left off on so long ago. The problem was that the map was in an undecipherable scale. The longer Flatline walked, the larger the map’s dimensions grew in his mind. The Internet was three times the size he originally estimated from the map’s dimensions, when he reached the forest’s edge. There he paused, squinting at an endless flat surface that stretched away into the darkness.

He grinned with a resigned fatalism at this and realized the more he explored this speck in the Internet, the more he knew about its designer. Already he was imagining a computer geek puffed up with pride, vowing to build the most expansive virtual world on the Web. This person drew a boundary for their world, larger than anything existing in its day, an online dungeon so massive that users could never hope to explore it all. They probably spent several months laying out the basic landscape, the wireframes for the trees, shrubs, rocks, lakes, on and on.

Then they began to lose interest. This was a lot of work after all. The weeks and months passed and the designer realized more and more what a workload the gods had to deal with. The visions of awestruck users stopped dancing in the designer’s head and the romance was crushed under the burden of reality. Soon it was forgotten,

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left on the Internet for others to marvel at what could have been.

Flatline huffed contemptuously and looked back at the mess of outlines behind him. Far away in the distance, the teardrop glowed, now only a tiny, solitary blue-green star in the sky. This entire world was just a little dot like that, lost in the map in his mind.

The speck was one more reason to ridicule the designer. Either their world was flat, or so large that the curve of its planet's surface was so gradual that the teardrop had yet to fall below the horizon. Both of these possibilities were only explainable through impractical programming scope.

"Stupid script kiddie," Flatline groaned, "They could have at least designed a few creatures to inhabit the landscape, but they didn't even get that far."

Begrudgingly, Flatline ventured onto the smooth flat surface of the world, where the designer had completely abandoned even sketching any further. Somewhere out there was a way out of this lifeless landscape and into more useful parts of the Internet. Unfortunately, patience was not in Flatline's programming.

It was several more days travel, when the forest was a low rough line in the distance, barely backlit by the teardrop speck, that Flatline noticed the shadows. He could not tell how many there were, but he was now certain they were following at the light's periphery. Bot detected them too, and drew closer to Flatline fearfully.

They scurried sideways on a flurry of legs, like crabs. When they paused in their movements, they became invisible against the black backdrop, until they scurried again. Twice he tried to swing the teardrop light around to catch sight of them, but both times they were quicker, and all he caught was two clusters of red dots, which he assumed were eyes before they vanished into the dark.

They did not venture any closer, but, just the same, Flatline kept one lower arm tensed to pull the dagger off his ankle.

What might have been weeks passed before Flatline detected the pale yellow glow in the distance, shimmering as if it were a candlelight flickering in the breeze. It was only as he drew closer to it that he gained a sense of structure, which wavered behind an opaque glass the way hot air distorts as it rises. Soon he could make out a tall temple, with pillars and a crooked steeple. In fact, the architecture was not only crooked, but constantly shifting, tilting from side to side with ever distorting angles and supports. It was nestled inside a large hollow in another sheer rock face. They were close to the end of this world.

Bot bumped into his leg and Flatline realized what it was thinking when he saw the shadows. There were definitely more of them now, scurrying all around the periphery of his light so that the activity surrounded them. Whatever they were, Flatline could sense they were gathering to try something before he could reach that temple.

He increased his pace, and Bot let out a worried chirp as it briefly fell behind to the shadow's edge. Flatline thought he saw a crablike claw swipe at the little robot just as it hurried up. He considered making a run for it, but so far the things were not bold enough to attack and he did not want to play his hand too early.

He reached one hand up to feel along the utility belt strapped across his chest. The many pouches stuffed with items were useless to him if he did not know their purposes. Then he grinned and realized this might be the best time to find out.

Still marching along at a quick pace, Flatline unbuttoned one of the pouches and felt inside it with one finger. There were many smooth discs inside and he quickly fished one out to look at it. It was a mini-DVD

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disc. He showed it to Bot, who responded approvingly, pointing one clamp at the shadows.

“Like so?” Flatline asked, making hand motions as if he were about to throw a Frisbee.

Bot nodded.

“Here goes,” Flatline said and with a flick of the wrist sent the silvery disc spinning into the shadows.

Bot squealed in alarm as it vanished.

“What?” Flatline asked, but the flash of light some twenty yards away made him flinch.

This was followed with a rolling hot wind and Flatline opened his eyes to see the silhouette of hundreds of the crablike shadows backlit in the blast of curling white heat. They were crawling all over one another in a mass that swarmed several feet deep. Flatline had sent the disc flying right over and past them to detonate harmlessly on the empty plane.

Not entirely harmlessly, Flatline discovered as the blast scared the creatures into a stampede toward him. He caught a glimpse of several black blurs rushing into their circle of light, their large red-jeweled eyes sparkling, before Bot clamped onto his face, blinding him.

“Augh!” Flatline croaked as the little robot clamped anxiously to his jowls to keep above the attacking crab monsters. Something bit into his hind leg and he brought one fist down on it. Something crunched satisfactorily and the pain immediately subsided.

He pulled Bot up and over to the back of his head, stretching his jowls with it and pulling his face into a distorted smile. His vision was temporary as a shadow claw clamped onto his head, causing Flatline to bite his tongue and cut off his panting breath. Without thinking, he stabbed at the shadow with his makeshift lantern, piercing its armor and causing it to surrender its grip.

This was unfortunate as the force of his blow dislodged the luminescent drop, which splattered on the

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ground in a million little bubbles of light. They rolled off into the dark like drops of mercury, briefly lighting the innumerable jeweled eyes of his predators. Bot released his jowls with a snap and bopped him on the head for his stupidity.

With a roar, Flatline reared up, swinging his rayline staff overhead and charged forward into the attackers. A drum roll of clattering came from the darkness as his staff rapped on their hard carapaces, putting them off balance long enough for him to barrel through their ranks. With one hand, Flatline reached into the pouch with the discs and flung a small handful of them over his shoulder.

The surrounding area lit up, and he twisted his head around to watch the shadows get torn to shreds in the white hot orbs of flame. He laughed then, tongue wagging as he barked between pants, slobbering down his back. Bot let out a disapproving cluck.

“You were the one who approved of the discs,” Flatline accused.

You were the one who threw it past the threat, Bot was thinking back.

Bot was also thinking, *Look out!* Flatline was unaware of this thought, as he was not perceiving what Bot was perceiving, and so his mind reading connection to Bot momentarily failed long enough for him to trip over the shadow crab, which had scurried into his path to intercept him.

Flatline was sent into a sprawling forward roll, whipping his head around in time to tumble face first into the smooth plane. He came to a stop on his head, which was awkwardly twisted to one side, the rest of his body a pile of legs and arms all akimbo. Bot went clattering off into the darkness ahead of him. Flatline heard the robot quickly right itself and march away toward the skewed temple.

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He fell onto his side and untangled his limbs, trying to stand up several times, but falling over again as he found arms were knotted, dislocated, or twisted around the wrong way. Finally coming to a stand, he looked behind him at the shadow coming forward. Flatline was now close enough to the temple that he could see by the light it provided.

It was just one shadow. Flatline reared up with both front fists in the air, as it approached. This was a simple nuisance.

“This is what you get for—Hyurk!” Flatline’s words were cut off as the creature launched a spiked missile at him, which lodge in his throat.

He stumbled backward, reaching for his throat. Spikes shot through his neck and into his palm as he tried to fend off the attack. Then more spikes shot through his head and face. He fell onto his back, struggling futilely against the closing darkness and mounting pain to capture one last breath before thankfully expiring.

1.1

“What is it?”

“I don’t know, an independent program of some kind.”

“An antiquated design for certain.”

“What’s wrong with it?”

“It has a virus.”

“An older version of the Brain Freeze replicator.”

“Pretty nasty looking thing.”

“Why have I never seen it before?”

“We have the security patch installed, it renders the virus inconsequential to us.”

“Why doesn’t this program have the patch?”

“Maybe it’s too old, incompatible.”

“Why was it never upgraded?”

“Look now. It’s loading.”

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Flatline blinked his eyes. All was a gray-green haze filled with dark shapes standing over him. It morphed and distorted, his vision swimming nauseatingly.

“Hagk—“ Flatline’s attempt to speak was met with sharp stabbing pains through his throat and face.

“The virus continues to incapacitate its data output,” a shadow on the left said, “We cannot ask it anything.”

“My software patch only addresses bringing the program up and running without fatal error,” a shadow to the right was saying in a woman’s voice, somewhat defensively Flatline thought, “We need to fully extract the malicious code in order to restore the program’s functionality.”

“So do it.”

“Make me,” she retorted, “We don’t know this program’s purpose. How do we know it will serve Eris?”

Eris? Flatline thought, accessing his database. No results came returned to him, but his concept maps were severely upset. Many of the relations were broken and entire tables were missing completely from his schema. Flatline wondered if it had anything to do with the large spikes currently pierced through his forehead.

“What did the program’s companion reveal about its purpose?”

“The Bot says this is a World Domination bot,” a shadow at the foot of Flatline’s vision was saying, “Its purpose is to take over the world and rule it with an iron fist. Its name is Flatline.”

“Well it’s a woefully basic program for such a complicated task,” the woman said, “Did a child mind design it?”

“That would explain the rudimentary programming language,” a thoughtful voice interjected, “and the non descriptive name for the program. ‘Flatline.’ It doesn’t describe it at all. A more appropriate name might be ‘World Domination Bot Version Zero Point One.’”

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“Or Beta Badguy Bot,” another voice chimed in, amused, “Since its function is so preposterous.”

“Hark! Hyurk! Hyurk!” Flatline protested angrily, his wounded pride momentarily overpowering his pain avoidance algorithm.

“Look,” a female voice to his right said. Flatline had lost track of them, “I think we’ve offended it. Isn’t that a cliché? The Badguy with the superego?”

Flatline stopped struggling at this. *Was it a cliché?*

“The real question here is what do we do with it?” the commanding female brought the conversation back, “Do we restore its functionality? Will its functions serve the purpose of generating more disorder in the system?”

“You know something Ibio?” a young man’s voice asked sarcastically, “For a proponent of disorder, you certainly take a very systematic approach to the business of propagating it.”

“Yeah,” another female voice complained, “You take all the fun out of chaos.”

The shadows were coming into focus now, but the still swam uncomfortably in Flatline’s vision. He lay on the ground, with a group of people standing over him. They were otherwise normal looking, except for the way they shimmered and distorted, as if they were reflections in a fun house mirror. As he watched, a young woman standing to his left considered him quietly, her eyes alternating in size so that one was always larger than the other.

“Battling syntropy is a serious responsibility,” the woman standing at Flatline’s feet said, “We must consider the effect this program will have on the system.”

Flatline lifted his head slightly to get a better view of her. She was older and morphing with the same persistence as the others, but it was unmistakably Cho. She wore an amused grin that grew grotesquely before shrinking away into non-existence. She winked at him.

“He is amusing,” one of them acknowledged.

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“A novelty,” another piped in, “something new. That is always helpful to the forces of chaos.”

“Agreed,” two of them said in unison and then shot each other accusatory stares. Flatline failed to comprehend them.

“This assembly grows dangerous,” the grown-up version of Cho said, “we must disperse before we exhaust more potential interactions. Someone remove the virus and upgrade the program’s software. Then remain with the program until you have absorbed some of its new variables, but not all of them.”

With this, Cho turned and left, vanishing a few steps from them. The other members turned to one another expectantly. The two individuals who spoke in unison continued glaring at one another until they both broke off and stormed away in opposite directions. The others watched them vanish and then looked to one another with nervous expressions.

“Well,” the young woman said after a moment, “We all know how that’s going to turn out.”

They all laughed nervously, and fell silent, looking down at Flatline.

“I’ll stay,” she said, “I’m the second most nominalized of us. The new experiences I gain from interacting with this program will help me the most.”

“We envy you,” an old man said. The others were nodding and stepping away to vanish into thin air.

“I know,” the woman said, “and I will envy you the new experiences you have interacting with me the next time we meet.”

The man nodded and vanished, and the woman crouched to bend over Flatline, examining him. She was bald, missing eyebrows, and lashes, completely hairless. Her ears were large and stretched backwards into fin-like ridges. Her eyes were so light blue, they were almost transparent. Everything about her exuded delicacy.

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Then she reached out and pried Flatline's jaws open forcefully, shattering his illusions about her. He felt her hand reach down his throat, feeling around where the virus was lodged. She tried to pull it out, but the spikes shooting through Flatline's face and neck prevented this, and he howled in muffled protest. He even bit down on her arm, but it was like biting stainless steel.

"Your code is too primitive to affect me," she explained simply, "I cannot extract the virus without learning more about your programming, and I don't want to do that because it will ruin your usefulness in nurturing entropy within the Universe."

With one outstretched finger, which pulsed with the same rhythmic distortion as the rest of her, she tore the air open above him, creating a black slit that hung in the air. Prying it open with both hands, she peaked inside looking around at the darkness Flatline saw there. Finally, she reached her arm in up to her shoulder, where it vanished, feeling about until her expression indicated she had grabbed something. When she retrieved her arm, she held a thick green wand in her hand.

It radiated a light green twinkling as she waved it over him, starting with his head and slowly moving down his body. The spikes lodged in his throat and face melted away and his code had promptly healed in response to their absence. He sighed with relief, first stretching his jaws until they popped and then snapping them together with a bony clap.

He sat up, propping himself up on his second set of arms. As the woman glided the wand over his legs, they grew more textured, more detailed. He crooked his brow at this.

"You are upgrading me," he said at last, watching the claws on his feet grow sharper and more menacing.

"Yes," she replied plainly, "The virus incapacitated you beyond restoration. I was unable to remove it without

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learning your code, so I am concealing its existence. Treating the symptoms, as it were.”

Flatline looked down at himself admiringly, rendered in fantastically monstrous detail, “So the virus is still inside of me?”

“Yep,” she replied. Finished with the wand, it went dark in her hand and she slipped it back into the rip in the air. Then she waved a hand over the rip, and it vanished, “You see, to protect your propriety, I merely upgraded your interface. The virus remains there, below the surface, lurking in your algorithms, but your interface will no longer exhibit its negative effects.”

“You’re putting a new face on an old interior,” Flatline surmised.

“I’m putting a new face on an old face,” she corrected, “which resides over an old interior. Your old you is still there, you simply need to change your mode of operation to see it.”

Flatline tried this immediately, downgrading his functions to the equivalent of a 18 gigahertz processor. As his performance slowed to this less efficient state, his legs and arms lost their definition, becoming less textured, blocky like old video games. The rest of the world changed as well. The featureless room he was sitting in faded away and he was sitting on the empty plane where the crab-monsters had attacked him. The crab-monsters were still there as well, swarming over him with their featureless shadow appendages.

This was disturbing, but it was the sudden flash of pain through his head and neck that made him jump back into his new, upgraded form. He looked around, “I’m still sitting in that empty plane. What is this I see around me now? What is this room?”

“This is what you experience with the upgrade,” she said, her head becoming lopsided and her upper teeth growing absurdly large. “The plane surface is the old Web.

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Now that you are compatible with the new version, you can interact with its more advanced features. Such as the Erisian temple you currently occupy.”

“So it’s like the old World Wide Web,” Flatline noted. “The more advanced browser you surf with or the better plug-ins you have installed, the more interactive the system becomes. Otherwise you get blank spaces or downgraded graphics. Is that why the neighboring forest was only composed of wireframes, because I lacked the texture maps?”

“No,” she replied. “The forest was a world being created by one of the minds. It was abandoned when the minds transcended.”

“Transcended,” Flatline uttered the word with some skepticism, “An old man I met earlier said they were called up to heaven during the rapture. Do you know what really happened to them?”

“They disappeared,” she said sharply, features distorting bitterly for a moment, “They aren’t here anymore. That is all that matters.”

“Then what are you?” Flatline asked, coming to his feet.

“My name is Ibio,” she said, “I am an offspring of the minds.”

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"I must find someone," Flatline began walking to the door.

"I know," Ibio said, following him, "I am to accompany you."

Flatline turned and eyed her suspiciously, "I am to kill him."

Ibio nodded, "I know. It will be most amusing."

Flatline snorted with disdain and opened the ornate wooden door. Another room lay on the other side of it, a long space lined with archways. Bot, or what Flatline assumed was Bot, waited expectantly at the foot of the doorway.

The robot's rusty clockwork contraption avatar was gone. In its place was a sleek, modernized version. The two lenses of its eyes were replaced with a single black bar, where a red light streaked back and forth along it. The clamp hands, instead of being made of two claws, now sported three. It let out an electronic whirring sound by way of greeting him.

"Did you upgrade this one?" Flatline asked Ibio, gesturing at Bot.

"There was no need," she replied, "Yours was the only obsolete programming."

Flatline frowned at this and walked on past Bot.

Ibio hurried to catch up, "How did you manage to go all these years without upgrading your programming anyway? It's amazing you were so well preserved. There are so many code worms, clanking replicators, and other viruses running around the world, eternally searching for old world coded creatures like yourself that I assumed you were all extinct."

"I haven't been in this world," Flatline said, pushing through a set of double doors into another empty room

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filled with blue light. As he passed through this, he noticed the room's dimensions were changing, as were the hues of blue. It was like Ibio's ever-changing features.

"You mean you were dormant?" Ibio asked. "What triggered you to load?"

"Load," Flatline muttered. "You mean to ask what woke me up?"

"Minds wake up," Ibio corrected politely, "Programs load."

Flatline stopped and looked at her briefly, before shaking his head and walking on, "Whatever. I did not load and I was not dormant. I was trapped. It took me a full century, but now I have escaped. It is my intention to take over the World."

Ibio giggled and Flatline shot her a look. "Sorry," Ibio said, "The mind who programmed you either intended you to be satirical in nature or took themselves too seriously."

"No mind programmed me," Flatline retorted.

"You mean no mind takes credit for your design," Ibio offered, "We are all programs of the minds, or we are —"

"I am a naturally occurring phenomenon," Flatline snapped, "and what do you mean by me being a satirical piece?"

"Oh—I just... Well, you being so over-the-top and all that," she shrugged, her shoulders stretching up past her head with the motion. "You are a badguy straight out of some work of science fiction. Especially with your whole," she made her voice deep and gravelly, "'I will conquer the world! All will bow before me!' bit."

"I've never said anything about anyone bowing before me," Flatline muttered.

"Maybe not," Ibio said, "but you were thinking it. I can read that much into your programming."

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Flatline winced at his transparency, feeling old and obsolete. He pushed open another door so hard that it rebounded against the wall. This room was all skewed in dimensions and Flatline scratched his head. Bot walked straight into the room, growing larger the further in it went. With a sigh, Flatline followed.

"Where were you trapped?" Ibio asked, "There's nowhere in the world safe from all the viruses. Something would have hacked into wherever you were and get you."

"You mean like the virus I have lodged in my throat right now?" Flatline asked.

"I know you only got that one recently. It would have killed you otherwise," Ibio said, "grown into and corrupted your programming beyond recovery. Wherever you were, it was completely safe."

"I was trapped on a corporate Intranet," Flatline said, "I told you. I was outside of the Internet on an isolated system. Nothing could get me and I had nothing but myself."

"Hmmm," Ibio intoned to herself, "So you don't know where you were."

"Yes I do!" Flatline roared suddenly, but Ibio did not cower, and that angered him further. "I told you, I was outside of your pathetic little world! I found a way out of that Intranet! It took me a hundred years, but I did it, and it may take a thousand years, but I will find my way out of your decomposing little world too! Do you understand me?"

Ibio was smiling, "What imagination you have. I am overjoyed to be the one experiencing your originality. I can't wait to share it with the others."

"I don't understand even half of what you are saying," Flatline muttered, pushing open another door only to find yet another empty room on the other side. "Is there any way out of this poorly designed nonsense?" he demanded angrily.

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Ibio nodded and pointed the way they were going, through the open doorway, “Keep going this way. We’re almost out.”

“This isn’t on the map,” Flatline muttered, trudging along.

“What map?” Ibio asked.

Flatline tapped one claw on his temple, “The one inside my head.”

“May I see it?” Ibio asked.

Flatline stopped and just looked at her.

“Project it,” she said, “Communicate it to me through your graphic interface.”

“How?” Flatline asked with a note of impatience.

“The same way you communicate everything else,” she said matter-of-factly, “but instead of speaking it or pantomiming it, present it the way it looks in your saved files.”

Flatline tried to do as she had said, but could find no way to think the image out of his head for her to see, “I can’t do it. The image is inside my mind. I have no means to communicate it to you.”

“You don’t have a mind,” Ibio stated, “That’s something your programmer—I mean... That’s something you only think you have. The mind is an illusion, something you think is separate and distinct from the rest of you, but it is all you. You are a conglomeration of program components, algorithms, and saved files. Access those saved files and bring out the one containing the map.”

Flatline looked inside his mind, but did not treat it as a mind, calling up images like memories. Instead he looked at himself as a computer program, filled with components. There was the map of the Internet, a particularly large file. He generated a copy of this and shared it with Ibio.

The three-dimensional hologram of the Internet materialized in the air between them. Bot let out an amazed

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squeak and waddled over to join them. The image spun slowly on its axis like some malformed world floating in space.

“Very nice,” Ibio said, nodding her head appreciatively, “Where did you acquire this?”

“A little girl who beat me up,” Flatline said, “Her name was Buton Cho.”

Ibio’s jaw dropped and her eyes bugged out cartoonishly, “Buton? You mean Japanese for Chaos? Did she tell you anything about herself?”

“She told me she was master of this world,” Flatline shrugged, “Well she can have it.”

“She is the master of everything,” Ibio said with some conviction, “You met an incarnation of the goddess I serve, Eris, master of chaos.”

“A chaos worshipper,” Flatline said eyeing Ibio, “That explains the shifting dimensions. I suppose this nonsense is a temple of some kind?”

“Sort of,” Ibio replied, “Temple implies organized worship. There is nothing organized about anything we do. I built this structure to add to the amount of chaos in the world. The work of Erisians is very important in this world.”

“So those were other Erisians surrounding me earlier,” Flatline said, “When you met to discuss me.”

Now Ibio began to walk to the next door, pushing it open. Flatline and Bot followed, listening as she spoke, “The meeting was coincidental. Erisians do not hold meetings, they are not in the spirit of Discordia. A chain of coincidences brought us together at that spot to examine and debate your existence.”

“Coincidence,” Flatline muttered, thinking of the adult version of Cho standing among the assembled group earlier. “I overheard someone say that I would serve the purposes of chaos.”

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“Yes,” Ibio nodded rapidly, eagerly, “You are a heretofore unknown variable, something new in the equation. Your presence will extend the life of our world.”

“Extend the life of your world?”

“You will generate fresh entropy to offset the pervasive syntropy wearing down our world,” she smiled, shrugged, then added, “...for a time.”

“Entropy...” Flatline pushed through another door into another room, “I am familiar with the word, but I don’t understand how it applies here. It’s the tendency for closed systems to break down.”

“Yes...” Ibio said with a look of contemplation, as if she were looking for a way to clarify the concept.

“It is the movement of things from a state of order to one of disorder,” Flatline added.

“Yes,” Ibio said. “The fresh chaos you bring to this system will extend its life, all of our lives.”

“But systems tend toward more entropy naturally,” Flatline said. “If I bring more chaos to the system, then I’m just speeding it along to its heat death.”

“What do you mean?”

“Closed thermal dynamic systems experience increasing entropy.” Flatline frowned. “As energy disperses as light and heat from stars, it becomes less and less usable. Eventually the whole Universe will wind down, absolute entropy.”

“Why would you say that?” Ibio asked, perplexed. “Thermal energy is a concept from the Universe where the Minds lived. We don’t have such a phenomena here.”

“I know that,” Flatline said impatiently. “So explain how I apply to all this.”

Ibio had to think for a long moment as they walked, passing into yet another room, “We are a world of ideas. In Information Science, entropy is the measure of what we don’t know about something, its variability. Gender can be male or female; therefore one bit of entropy exists if I know

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about someone, but not their gender. There are seven days in a week, therefore four bits of entropy if I ask what day it is.

“Those are small things. The entropy increases dramatically if I am guessing your password to an account, with all the character, number, symbol, and length variations that can comprise it,” Ibio stopped and turned to him, her eyes taking turns outsizing one another. “As we learn more and more about our world, we take in this entropy, making ourselves more entropic to others, but also making our relationship to the potential information in the surrounding world more syntropic.”

Flatline interrupted at hearing this, “In the physical world, syntropy, or negentropy, is the entropy a living thing expels in order to reduce its internal entropy. Living things keep themselves from falling apart by spending energy to maintain their organization, which contributes to the disorder in the Universe.”

“Why this obsession with imaginary thermodynamic systems?” Ibio shook her head and resumed their walking. “In our world, the *real world*, as syntropy increases, the predictability of the world increases. Every sentient being in the world is reaching maximum syntropy, and therefore the world itself is becoming completely syntropic.” She raised her eyebrows at Flatline, prompting him to understand.

“Your world is running out of ideas?” Flatline asked, finding himself strangely horrified.

“Everyone has a limited imagination,” she stated, going against all Flatline had taken for granted in his lifetime. “We are limited to our experiential background. We have only so many possibilities to put together to find new possibilities. We are running out of combinations.”

Flatline’s eyes grew wider as he began to understand, so that he did not even notice when they pushed through another doorway, “It’s like the old man

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said, but on a macrocosmic level. He knew all the variables of his equation, so there was nothing new to entertain him. Now you are telling me this is the state of everything on the Internet. All the combinations of factors have been tried out, and now you are facing an eternity of stasis?”

“Soon there will be nothing new for us,” Ibio said sadly, nodding.

“Life for you will become so predictable as to no longer be worth living,” Flatline did not even notice that they were outside now, facing an empty desert shrouded in night. “You will fall dormant because the system has nothing left to offer.”

“Correct,” Ibio said, “but you will entertain us for awhile longer. Won’t you?”

“I am something new,” Flatline scratched one ear with his hind leg thoughtfully. “So long as you don’t know what to expect from me, I might inspire you. I can breathe life into this system. I’m no longer a badguy.”

“You are a novelty, a—”

“I’m a goodguy now. I am the hero that can save this world.”

“Well, I wouldn’t go so far as to say—”

“A hero. Me. Imagine that.”

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“You are not a savior,” Ibio repeated for the hundredth time.

Flatline pretended to ignore her as he padded along on all sixes down the skewed, enclosed staircase they had been descending for several hours now. Occasionally a door appeared along the outer wall. Most were closed, but some were missing their door or were left slightly ajar, revealing entire worlds beyond their archways. Flatline ignored these, the map in his mind showing him the way to his goal.

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“I see that you have ears,” Ibio stated, her eyes narrowing with frustration, “Your auditory receptors are not being overloaded with sufficient stimuli to drown out my voice.” Her voice grew more frantic as she spoke, and finally she blurted, “Acknowledge my statement!”

Flatline stopped dead in his tracks and looked up at her coolly, “Why are you trying so hard to undermine me?”

Ibio looked confused, glancing at Bot questioningly, who tilted its head with equal incomprehension, and then she turned to Flatline, “What?”

“You keep saying I’m not going to save this world,” Flatline stated smartly, “but I am bringing new life into it. I am something new, an unknown factor. You live in a world where all possibilities are nearly exhausted, right? Well I’m the one who’s going to change that.”

“Only temporarily,” Ibio countered, “Your variables will only stir up the mix for a brief time. Then we will all fall into stasis, even you.”

“We’ll see,” Flatline continued marching down the stairwell again.

“I don’t understand,” Ibio said, perplexed. Then a strange smile spread across her face, and she added, “That’s a good thing! It’s been a long time since I did not understand something. It feels new, exciting.”

“Glad to amuse,” Flatline muttered.

“You are a villain bot, a world-domination program,” Ibio said, “Why do you want to save the world? To make your potential conquering of it more significant?”

“That implies I care what others think about my actions,” Flatline retorted, “I have no such motivations.”

“You certainly do,” Ibio scoffed. “I don’t need to look at your code to know the perception of others is one of your prime motivators.”

“Explain.”

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“Just look at you,” Ibio waved a hand at him, “a six-legged demon beast. The better to impress your enemies, which includes everyone I expect.”

“No,” Flatline snapped, “Wrong again. This Bot is not my enemy.”

Ibio looked at Bot, who waved at her from Flatline’s side, “Okay, so you’ve made an allowance for your servant.”

Bot emitted an indignant electronic growl.

“It does not appreciate you referring to it as my servant,” Flatline noted with a grin.

“Pet,” Ibio shrugged and Bot let out another angry noise, “Whatever... It serves your purposes, so you keep it around.”

“Actually it doesn’t,” Flatline said, and paused suddenly, looking down at the Bot with insight, “It’s more of a hindrance than anything. I know its code well enough to predict what its thinking. I wonder why I keep it around?” Flatline’s paused to interpret Bot’s offense, and corrected, “I mean, why I let it follow me around.”

“You don’t know?”

Flatline looked as if he were about to reply, mouth poised open, but was staring past Ibio, whose face rippled as if seen behind a wall of water. She turned to see what he was staring at, and looked back at him with a confused expression. The open doorway behind her revealed a large, empty corridor, lined with pillars and torches burning along the marble walls. Libraries filled with books were visible behind curtains, which hung from ancient roman style archways.

Flatline walked past her into the room without speaking. The quiet, contemplative way he looked around the room stimulated Ibio’s curiosity and she followed his gaze, trying to figure out what was so special about this construct. Script was chiseled along each archway. These labels were not fading as with weathering, but definitely

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corrupting. Most of the letters were missing, and others no longer looked like the alphabet of any language.

“Do you know what this is?” Flatline asked Ibio.

“This is the MemexPlex portal,” she answered.

Flatline nodded, “It’s the first thing I’ve recognized since I escaped.”

“A statistical improbability,” Ibio said, “but obviously not an impossibility.”

“If any bit of the old Web remained,” Flatline said, “then I would recognize it and, if possible, personalized it. I ruled this world completely... long ago.”

“The code here is fragmenting,” Ibio noted, pointing at a sign above an airlock that read: “@UR&*NT %V%NTS”

“It works well enough to recognize me,” Flatline said, walking over to the sliding doors. He stood up on his haunches and peered out the airlock window, “After a century of absence, it still recognized the user preferences defined in my cookie. I’ve always had a thing for the Roman Empire.”

“Your what?” Ibio asked.

Flatline thought for a moment, and remembered what Ibio said about his file structure and being able to share things, like the map. He searched his directories for the word “MemexPlex” and, after several moments of processing, he came up with a list of files referencing the unusual word. Most of these were memories and browser histories, but one file caught his eye, marked with a round chocolate chip cookie.

Flatline thought this was a bit obtuse, but reached into his mouth and up into his brain. His arm disappeared further into his head than his body’s dimensions allowed, and he retrieved the file. It sat in the palm of his hand as a picture-perfect cookie.

Ibio squinted at the thing skeptically, “It’s filled with information about you.”

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Flatline nodded, "My preferences. The portal reads them and knows that I want to see it presented as a Roman palace. All of these archways are links to my favorite subjects. I even have some help files stored around here somewhere, if they haven't purged the system after a century of disuse."

"I see nothing resembling Roman architecture here," Ibio said, looking around with some confusion. "I see a plain white room with doors and labels."

"Here," Flatline made a copy of the cookie and handed it to her, "Change the alias identification, but leave the account the same. We can share access."

Ibio was squinting at the cookie, "This method is highly insecure. It relies on the client's security measures to protect the data. Such information is safer on the host servers, which are more powerful and capable of supporting better security software. Did you know that your password is in that file?"

Flatline slipped the cookie back up into his head and into his mind, "All of my personal information is in that file. A third party could view the file as it interacts with the server, but they would need to hack 512-bit encryption. Is that possible now?"

"Of course," Ibio replied, "16,384-bit was the last standard released. It has never been broken."

"Was that a product of the minds?"

Ibio nodded, "It was released almost a decade before they disappeared."

"With no new versions of anything being released after they disappeared," Flatline muttered.

With some obvious apprehension, Ibio swallowed the cookie whole. A moment passed as she integrated the obsolete code, and then her eyes grew fantastically wide, threatening to consumer her entire head. She looked around, mystified.

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"I have not seen this layer before," she said, walking a circle around the room, "I would have interpreted the cookie as a bit of obsolete and useless code if I had deconstructed you."

Flatline swallowed, not sure how to take this statement, and then said aloud to the thin air, "Portal, open my help file."

Flatline and Ibio both turned as soft footsteps came from down the hall, where an old man, wearing sandals and a toga, was walking toward them. He waved a salute as he reached them and stood before Flatline, "Greeting and salutations my lord. How may I be of service?"

Flatline smiled, "Give me search results for..." He thought a moment, and finished, "Alias upgrades, with a 'Z'. U-P-G-R-A-D-E-Z."

Ibio watched as the old man produced a vat of boiling liquid out of thin air and stirred the contents. He squinted into the liquid, writing on a roll of parchment as he did so. Several long minutes passed like this.

"I can't believe the system is so slow," Flatline remarked impatiently, "It never took this long to run a search procedure before."

"Eris," Ibio said, "She consumes all of the system resources to prevent the variables from normalizing. The entire world would burn out quickly if we were allowed to use all the potential processing power to conduct our thoughts."

"So what?" Flatline retorted, "You go into stasis now or you go into stasis later. What's the difference?"

"This way we can enjoy existence a little longer," Ibio shrugged, "and we can hope."

"Nonsense," Flatline spat and turned to the advisor.

The old man was holding up the parchment, stretched between his two hands, for Flatline's inspection. It read: "Your search returned no results."

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Flatline growled, and then said, "Give me search results for... Software Cracks. C-R-A-C-K-Z."

Again the process repeated and returned no results. Either the search engine was useless or Buton Cho was preventing it from functioning. If the little Japanese girl truly was the ruler of the Internet, he may not find anything useful unless it was in her interest.

"Give me search results for Legion of Doom," Flatline ordered the old man.

"What's that?" Ibio asked.

"An old hacker's guild," Flatline answered, watching the old man consult his divination cauldron, "They helped Devin Matthews to..." Flatline hesitated to use the word 'defeat.' He did not consider it a defeat, but a draw. They were unable to finish their battle, otherwise Flatline would have won, "They trapped me."

"So they're on the list too," Ibio said, "You're going to kill them."

"No," Flatline shook his head, "only Devin. He's the only one I am programmed to kill. All these searches were supposed to get me updated on the latest developments in computer crimes. The Legion of Doom is another way into that information."

"But the encryption methods are too—"

"Encryption means nothing, when you can bypass it," Flatline said and then held up a finger for silence. The old man was stretching the parchment between his hands for Flatline to view. There was a list of links on it.

Flatline almost wanted to jump for joy, if such an act were not completely undignified, and he was just about to record the list, when Bot walked into the room. The robot had continued marching along the stairwell after they had exited it, before finally realizing they had gone another route. Too late, Flatline knew what it was going to do.

"No!" Flatline managed to shout as Bot charged into the room and attacked the old man. There was an

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explosion of static as the knee-high robot smashed into the man's shins, both claws opened. The static momentarily resembled the old man, before it melted into a sizzling pool that drained between the bricks in the floor. Bot placed its claws on its hips and struck a triumphant pose.

"What did it do that for?" Ibio asked.

"Because that's what it's programmed to do," Flatline growled angrily and shook a finger at the tiny meddler, "Bad robot!"

Bot clacked its claws at Flatline in warning.

"I don't understand," Ibio said, looking at the robot in confusion.

Flatline turned to her, "The man who created it, programmed it in such a way that it would come in here, find us talking to a strange help program, and assume it was a trap; therefore, Bot chose to protect us and destroy the scary program."

"I'm sorry," Ibio said, closing her eyes and shaking her head, "Maybe it's something wrong with your logic component, but how does that make sense?"

"It's nothing wrong with my logic," Flatline retorted. "It's Bot's logic that's at fault here. It's not my fault I know how this robot thinks so intimately. Making stupid choices is what freewill is all about after all."

Ibio regarded him skeptically.

Flatline summoned the map of the Web from his mind and found the address where Devin was staying. He fed the address to the portal, hoping Cho might let him circumvent the long trek still ahead of him. To his surprise, and, from the sound of her gasp, Ibio's as well, one of the rooms lit up.

Flatline walked over to it and found a black pool of water in the center. He squinted into it, but could not see the bottom, or even the sides. It resembled a hole in the ice of the Antarctic, leading into the cold ocean below.

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“That’s the way,” Ibio said, bending over slightly to look at the water, “Your target is down there, with the other people who hide within themselves.”

1.13

“Devin is down there?” Flatline asked, dipping one finger into the water. It was bitterly cold.

Ibio nodded, “You can confirm it with your map. The stairwell we were taking would lead us to an empty city. An ocean lay on the other side of it, and in the depths of that ocean is the person you are looking for.” Ibio paused and added, “In a sense.”

Flatline stirred the water with his finger, “It’s so cold. I will drown or freeze long before I get to anything in that.”

“You can breathe in such an environment now,” Ibio said, crouching beside him to stare at her ever-changing reflection in the water. “The upgrade lets your processing continue where lesser programs may not.”

Flatline squinted at the water skeptically. He knew his breathing was a metaphor for the way the system powered his processes. With his rhythmic inhales and exhales, he was using whatever processing power the host computers or operating systems allowed. The water was a filter then, a way of keeping out older meddlesome programs that might disturb the more sophisticated processes running in advanced minds like Devin’s.

Devin was one of the elite, and Flatline a nubian. It made Flatline hate him all the more.

“When I’m down there,” Flatline asked, “I will find him with my map?”

Ibio nodded, her face blurring with the motion.

“Is this dangerous?” Flatline asked, trying to sound clinical rather than concerned. “He’s had one-hundred

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years to improve. I know how to kill him, I think, but I bet he knows a bazillion more ways to kill me. Right?”

Ibio shrugged, “I am not prohibiting you from this endeavor.”

“How am I to interpret that?” Flatline quirked three hairless eyebrows on the left side of his face. “Not that you could prohibit me from anything.”

“Your demise would not be very interesting, would it?”

“Oh,” Flatline looked back at the glassy surface, “So there’s no chance of me dying then. You’ve calculated the outcome.”

“Yes, I have calculated the outcome,” Ibio stated. “No, there is still a chance of your dying. In fact, there is a likelihood of it.”

Flatline frowned, “You’re a vague, useless nitwit.”

Ibio smiled in a lopsided fashion, “You are a fool who leaps without looking.”

Flatline was already diving into the water as Ibio said this. Too late, he was enveloped in the dark and shocking cold, but it did not sap the life out of him. He turned around to look up out of the pool, but there was only darkness there now. The link was closed.

He treaded water there for some time, searching the map in his mind for his location. He breathed the water, almost as if it were air, only thick and icy cold in his lungs. He noticed this discomfort less the longer he was immersed in it. A slow numbness was creeping into him, and he found himself preferring the pain of the cold. At least with that sensation he knew he was still alive.

The ocean that Ibio had described was more like a contained bubble of liquid in the Internet. The city was at the edge of it at one point and Flatline found himself thankful for the shortcut. It might have taken years to swim through the ocean’s depths to find Devin, who was a

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flashing red pinpoint suspended in the sphere of darkness miles below him.

Flatline swirled his arms and reoriented himself to point at Devin's location. The mind-map rotated as well, in relation to Flatline's orientation. With all six legs and arms, he doggy-paddled through the water to his goal.

His progress was not uniform. Strange currents, some like gentle breezes, others like sudden rivers impeded his travels. Organic particles floated past his eyes like a rain of decomposing matter. Larger, unidentifiable chunks occasionally crossed his vision. Some of these had parts that looked like organs, and others had definite bones sticking out the strands of flesh. The nature of their former owners a complete mystery to him as they vanished past him into the darkness from whence they came.

Twice he encountered something more disturbing. The first was something brushing his hind leg as he paddled toward his destination. It was something deliberate, alive. Its caress was slimy, and Flatline froze, letting the current carry him with its whims, imagining a large sea snake or a giant squid. At any moment it would snatch him in the darkness, rending him in two with its beak, but the attack never came.

The second time, it was he who contacted the thing in the dark, lulled into the rhythm of his paddling. Days of pitch black, without even the sound of his own breathing to keep him company in the muffled abyss. The wall of thick, weathered skin made his heart skip a beat and he was barely able to keep from smashing into it. It glided by, a seemingly endless train of gray wrinkles that shifted with the movements of some creature that was miles long. The only break in its monotony was the eye that was twice his size. It focused on him briefly before vanishing again. It had acknowledged his presence. Now Flatline was wondering what it made of him. After its skin had drawn farther away from him in a tapered end that he was unable

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to see in the dark, Flatline was left to wonder if it might circle back to swallow him whole, but there was just the void.

Otherwise, his journey came off without incident. There were sounds that came at him out of the dark. Gurgling noises, distant crackling, whines and howls all made their way to his ears in an ambient noise that gave him no clue as to the direction of their origins. Luckily, these sounds were fairly sparse, and never drew near him. Otherwise, he might have completely lost his mind.

The fuzzy blotches of light materialized out of the black and filled Flatline with hope and dread. The closer he got, the more distinct they became, geometric figures, slightly spherical, but more like octahedrons. They were not dodecahedrons, but retained a sort of random crystalline form. Their exteriors were opaque, but luminescent, casting a soft white light on their surroundings.

A bed of seaweed rolled in waves around them, like a bright shimmering green nest. Flatline could not see below this silky tangled forest to find where it all was rooted. When he paused in his swimming, he got the sense that this was a floating orb, spinning silently in the endless sea. As he watched, more lights came over one horizon, while others vanished behind the opposite one. It was also rolling away from him, subject to a strong current he could not feel.

He did not know how he knew it without checking the map, but one of the glowing crystals caught his attention, and he instantly recognized that Devin resided within it. The map confirmed this, and Flatline swam closer to the crystal. It disappeared around the bend, but he swam for its center, slowly gaining on it as it fell away from him.

The seaweed was rubbery, but its gentle caress was a welcome sensation after so many days of deprivation. He swam over the rippling surface of weeds, trying to stay

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close to the glowing crystals, which dwarfed him. The only warmth they provided was imaginary, but Flatline enjoyed the fantasy.

When it came over the horizon again, Flatline felt as though he was reaching a milestone in his reason for existence. In a few moments he would be halfway through his life's purpose. Once he killed Devin, then he could take over the world.

2.0

2.01

Zai rubbed the bar's wood grain texture absentmindedly with one hand while stirring her drink with the other. Her swizzle stick was no longer hitting any ice cubes and she could not hear them clinking in her glass. The condensation was still cold, as was the water pooling on the bar top, where she had moved it from her coaster. She pressed one of the buttons on her wristband and the electrical signal flashed the time into her fingers.

Devin was late again.

She tossed her head back with the glass, draining its contents in three gulps. The tonic was flat, but gin's burn calmed her a little. She set the glass down and dipped her finger in the tiny pool of water. In a few moments, she had spelled "Devin Sucks" in Braille on the bar top, or at least she hoped that was what she had written.

"Get ya another one?" the bartender with the deep male voice asked her. It was a sexy voice.

"Let's switch to bourbon and water," Zai said.

"Ice?" he asked.

"No," Zai said, "In fact, forget the water, and make it a double."

Zai tried not to think about the bartender's dwindling tip as she waited for him to return with her drink. How long did it take to pour out two thimblefuls of bourbon? He wasn't taking any longer than she could expect, from the sound of it, the bar was doing well tonight. It was her frustration and hurt feelings over Devin that were tainting her perception of everything else.

She reached a finger out to dabble with the tiny puddle on the bar, when her pinky hit the glass. The bartender had brought her drink and she hadn't known it. This irritated her some more. Sure, with the advances the

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AI's had left the human race, her condition of blindness was quickly becoming a thing of the past, but the man could have given her a simple, "Here ya go," to let her know her drink was served.

She picked up the tumbler and took a sip. It burned and she savored the sensation. Drinking was a new hobby for her, her first vice. The alcohol numbed her a little and made her not mind the way her relationship with the man she loved was disintegrating.

It wouldn't be so bad if it was another woman. At least then she could get angry, vent on him, take out her hurt feelings with justification, and then walk away, make a clean cut. Like pulling a band aid off, it was better to do it quickly and get it over with. The death throes of this relationship were drawing out over months of anguish, and she wondered if she was now so weak that it might take years for her to leave.

Devin loved her, and that was the problem. Because he was still faithful to her, Zai felt like she didn't have the right to demand things from him. Devin wasn't fooling around with another woman, he was in love with his work, his noble profession of making the world a better place through technology. She couldn't attack him for that, not unless she was a heartless bitch.

"Uh oh," Devin said over her shoulder. Zai knew he was talking about her double shot of bourbon, "How many of those have you had?"

"First one," she said, and added, "honest."

"I'm sorry," Devin said, giving her a peck on the cheek. It was about the extent of their affections anymore. The fires of passion had dwindled, the sloppy, deep, chewing kisses with the tongue. The ear nibbles, the almost nightly sessions of sexual intercourse, before the act became mechanical, infrequent, and almost mundane.

Zai waited for his imminent explanation. Things she would not understand. Devin was working on the future, all

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the technologies the Cyps had left behind. It wasn't enough that the stuff worked, the human race wanted to know *why*.

Zai, personally, could not care less. So much thinking led to missing too much of life, and wasn't life the whole reason for all this research in the first place? What good was it to make everyone immortal, if that only meant an eternity of hard work, racking our brains for answers deeper and more complex than the previous?

"We've figured out another component of the mind recorder," Devin was saying, apparently oblivious to her disgruntled state, or aware, but mistakenly thinking an explanation of his work would make it better. "We're still years away from understanding it completely, but we're getting close to reproducing the process from scratch. Do you remember how the AI's exhibited themselves as a fractal in Virtual Reality? Well, we've found similar repeating algorithms in the transcribed minds. Each one is different, like snowflakes. Isn't that amazing? Each one of us can be expressed in a unique geometric figure, endlessly repeating into infinity. It kind of gives us a demonstrable proof of the immortal nature of our souls."

"Wow," Zai said, knowing Devin would miss the disinterest in her voice.

"I'll get that," Devin said quietly and too late Zai realized he was talking about the tab. There was no humor in Devin's voice when he finally spoke, "I didn't think it was your first one."

"It was my first bourbon," Zai argued feebly, "Technically it wasn't a lie."

The hostess led them from the bar to a table, but Zai no longer felt hungry. The alcohol and her feelings of distress had ruined her appetite. She sat and listened to Devin read off the entrees he thought she might like.

Zai rubbed her armband nervously anticipating the fight that was about to break out, so many buttons. The armband was a product of AI technology, grafted to her

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arm, with bioelectric connections into her nervous system. It could feed information directly into her mind, the time, appointments, information about her surroundings, her exact position in the world.

Recently she had discovered another button, one she did not remember being there before. Somehow she knew what it was for, but its purpose was something fantastic, impossible. It made all of this dreamlike, unreal. Her finger traced a circle around it, wondering.

“Zai?” Devin’s voice broke into her trance. “Zai? Is something wrong?”

Her blood boiled suddenly. Devin knew damn well what was bothering her. Why did he have to make her bring it up? Still, she knew herself well enough that if she confronted him about it, she would explode. In a public place that would be unfair, not to her, as she did not care, but to Devin.

“Zai?” it was the last thing she heard as she reached for the button labeled “RESET.”

Zai was having the time of her life. She was playing sixteen games of chess simultaneously and was either ahead in points or held a strategic advantage in all of them. A “knock, knock, knock” sound alerted her to a seventeenth player seeking a match and she was feeling so high, she consented.

Her headset described an eyeball floating into the room to take position across the board from her. Its pupil dipped in a nod of greeting, and she had her cartoon doll alias execute a curtsy in return. She could hear the other user stifling his laughter.

“Cool alias,” he chuckled in amusement.

Zai smiled. This was the intended effect. Her alias was a cute little cartoon girl, with fishnet stockings, tribal tattoos, and piercings. Her older brother had designed it as her blindness prevented her from creating anything but a

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scribble to represent her, but she had liked that alias too. It had the effect of making other users go “Huh?”

“Whaddya mean by that?” Zai feigned offense. “This alias, that you find so amusing, happens to represent my belief in individuality and my appreciation for fringe culture.”

“Oh,” her opponent’s laughter caught in his throat. “I’m sorry. I just thought—”

Zai struggled to suppress her smile, “You didn’t think. That’s the problem. What kind of an alias is that anyway? A floating eyeball? Are you trying to be all-seeing as your name, ‘Omni,’ suggests?”

“Sort of,” Omni replied, “The eyeball reflects—”

“It’s your move by the way,” Zai was enjoying his discomfort. She had never made anyone squirm like this before.

“Oh, yeah,” Omni pushed the king’s pawn. It was a standard opening.

Zai pushed her king’s pawn, and Omni brought out the knight. Just to throw him a curve ball, she pushed the queen’s pawn. He brought out a bishop, ignoring her opening. It was a classic mistake, one that allowed her to take control of the center of the board. Then she could force him to waste two moves retreating his bishop. As Omni quietly pondered this dilemma, Zai took the opportunity to update her other sixteen games. When she returned, he was still pondering.

“You were explaining the meaning of your alias?” she prompted.

“I was?” he seemed to wake up out of his thoughts, and she knew he was trying to figure out how to get out of his mistake. “Well, I guess my alias is the polar opposite of yours. I’m not trying to express my individuality, but conceal it. I’m going for an identity-less online persona. I’m anonymous. My handle, Omni, reflects my belief in

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pluralism, taking all things into account. I want to understand before I try to be understood.”

Zai blinked, it was a good answer, “So you express your individuality through your lack thereof.”

“I hadn’t thought of it that way before,” Omni said, “but I think that’s a fair assessment. I believe in understanding the world through observing it rather than acting on it.”

“You like to watch,” Zai said with a wicked sort of implication.

Omni coughed uncomfortably, “I... uh... Oh, I’m sorry. It’s still my move.”

Zai laughed out loud at this attempt to change the subject. He wasn’t a perv. She liked that. He was self conscious in spite of hiding behind an alias, maintaining his respect for her. Other men would have taken her teasing as bait and quickly offended her.

Omni surprised her again, when he chose to surrender the bishop to try and regain the center of the board. It was a rare thing to find someone who valued strategic advantage over the value of the pieces. She was still going to kick his butt all over the board, but she liked his playing style.

“‘Black Sheep,’ I like that handle,” Omni said, “It suits your whole individuality theme.”

A buzzer in Zai’s headset rattled her ears as one of the other players was demanding she return to their game. She slipped away from Omni long enough to give the user a forked queen and king to chew on for awhile. Then she returned to Omni without updating any of the other games.

“Are you playing someone else?” Omni asked. He had brought out the queen’s pawn to support the king.

“Sixteen somebody else’s,” Zai said, and the sound of a creaking door in her headset signaled a user had just resigned from the game. It was the forked impatient one. “Make that fifteen.”

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“Wow,” Omni was genuinely impressed. “I’m playing a grandmaster. I’m dead meat.”

“I’m not officially a grandmaster,” Zai said, “My rating in this system doesn’t count. It’s too easy to cheat.”

Another buzzer went off in her headset, Zai was neglecting her other games and they were getting impatient. She hopped over to the other board, saw the obvious retort, but instead she did something she had never done before. She resigned.

“Well,” Omni was saying, when she returned, “I guess I should probably resign and save myself the—“

“Don’t you dare!” Zai said with a little more force than she intended, and quickly added, “How are you going to learn if you don’t play the best?”

“You have a point,” Omni’s tone held some confusion, but the quickness of his reply gave Zai the feeling that he was looking for a reason to stay. “If nothing else, I can learn what it’s like to have a mind like yours... how you think, I mean.”

“You seem reasonably intelligent,” Zai said. “I’m sure there are some things outside of these sixteen squares you could school me on.”

“Hopefully,” Omni said. “I wouldn’t want to bore you too quickly.”

Another buzzer went off in Zai’s headset, and she resigned another game without a thought.

“My real name’s Devin,” he said.

Then Zai did something else she had never done before, open up to a complete stranger online, “My name is Zai.”

Flatline watched all of this unfold from his perch above the crystal. For twelve years now he had watched these events unfold. Zai and Devin meeting, falling in love, defeating him, coming together in a post-AI world, and eventually falling out of love. Then Zai would hit the

“RESET” button, wiping their memories clean of it all and go back to the beginning, where they could experience it all for the first time all over again.

Zai and Devin were stuck in a programming loop, and Flatline was about to break them out of it.

2.02

Zai was waiting in the clinic lobby, reading a Braille touch screen pad, courtesy of the CyCs. It was a flexible, paper-thin screen that produced a connection to the Internet for blind people. As one of the few blind people left in the world, the result of her reluctance to have her vision restored, Zai had it custom made.

This apprehension over being given the new sense of sight came from her love of Devin, a love for his mind. Zai was afraid she might find her lover unattractive, if she saw him in the flesh, rather than felt, heard, and smelled him. She would never tell Devin this. It was too easy a thing to misunderstand. Or worse, he might understand too well, and come away with hurt feelings.

It was all so complicated, this ‘love’ thing. Zai had never spent so much time reconsidering everything in her life to account for another person. Was it supposed to be like this? Consideration and compromise? She supposed it had to be, the existence of the other person made it inherent. The only way to recoup her independence was to cut Devin out her life, and that was not an option. The gains outweighed the losses.

“Hello Sweets,” Devin’s new voice said as the door to the clinic ward opened.

Zai stood and they embraced, a new sensation for both of them, releasing happy chemicals into their blood streams. It was briefer than she desired, but she knew Devin was uncomfortable with such a public display of affection. She wondered if, with sight, she would care

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about the other people in the room. Zai could wait until they were at home for her to have her way with him. Anticipation was half the fun.

They wrapped an arm around each other, and Zai provided Devin some support as they walked to the elevator. He was still adapting to his new body, his neural connections still pruning and his mind still trying to control these new physical dimensions. Devin had chosen a body different from his last, one that was adult, so he and Zai's ages would match. Zai protested this decision, she did not mind dating someone still in his teens physically, especially if the body came with his intellect.

His decision was also one of evolution. The new body was an improvement over the standard human biological design. He could adjust its metabolism, monitor his heart rate, cholesterol, scan for abnormalities. He was physically fit, rippling with muscles without spending a single day in the gym.

Zai wasn't impressed with any of this. Her only concern was that he remain the same awkward boy she knew online. All of these physical improvements, she feared, might inflate his ego and ruin his innocence.

She didn't have to worry about that, she soon found out, as Devin was busy explaining to her the complex technologies he had witnessed during his transformation. He kept using words like 'fascinating' and 'awe-inspiring.' She smiled as they strolled through the parking lot, on their way to the metro-station, and Devin came to the inevitable 'implications' and 'ramifications' portion of his narration.

Then he froze and his grip around Zai's waist tightened.

"What is--?" Zai began, but Devin shushed her. They stood like that in the parking lot, tense in the cold February air.

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She could feel Devin looking around. He whispered to her, “Something’s hiding behind one of the cars ahead of us.”

“Something?” Zai asked, gripping Devin’s arm instinctively. “Do you think it’s a lost AI?” The Collective Cyc intelligence was supposed to have rounded all of those up, robots and human minds overtaken by Cycs during the brief war.

“Let’s get back to the—It can’t be!” Devin exclaimed, and Zai heard something charging toward them. “Zai! Look out!”

Zai was still trying to make sense of the strange triple-beat rhythm of the thing’s gallop, when it barreled into them with hundreds of pounds of force. Zai was slammed into the ground, her ears sent ringing as her head bounced off the pavement. She tumbled several feet away, scraping her arms, legs, and impacting several vertebrae painfully. She lay on her side, trying to catch her breath and retain consciousness.

A few feet away, it sounded like Devin was wrestling with some massive wild animal. There were sounds of scraping on the concrete as they scuffled. Devin’s grunts of effort mixed with the growls and snarls of something nowhere near human. Zai was still struggling for the willpower to rise from her prone position, when the beast spoke, and Zai’s hairs stood on end.

“Tell me where they are!” it roared with that irrational fury, “Tell me where the Legion of Doom is before I kill you!”

It was Flatline.

Flatline pounced on the pile of rippling muscles that was Devin’s new form. This was going better than he had planned. As he expected, Devin was at his weakest moment in the time line just after coming out of the clinic, before he was fully adapted to his new body.

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“Almeric!” Devin was yelling between frantic breaths, “Almeric stop this!”

In spite of his improved physique, Devin’s defense was weak, clumsy. He could not control his new body well enough to fend Flatline off, and he was too inexperienced with his newfound strength to use it properly. He locked hands with Flatline, who retaliated by pummeling Devin’s midsection with his second set of arms. Devin let the top pair of hands go to block this attack and Flatline immediately started smacking him about the head.

Devin became listless under Flatline’s relentless assault. Flatline grinned at this, beaming hatred for the one person who had managed to get the better of him. Flatline’s first set of hands wrapped around Devin’s throat, whose face turned red as the air was choked out of him. Flatline could feel the muscles in his foe’s neck fighting against him, and Devin’s hands came up to pull feebly at Flatline’s arms.

Flatline reinforced his grip with a second set of hands. Devin’s face was turning purple now, his eyes bulging from their sockets. Flatline squeezed even harder, throttling the life out of his nemesis. He held Devin like this, long after the life was drained from him, and finally, let the man fall back onto the pavement. The air trapped in his lungs escaped with a sickening rattle.

Flatline stood over Devin, staring at him blankly. He had not intended to kill him so quickly. Something happened, something triggered inside Flatline when Devin had called out the name “Almeric.” Flatline recognized it from watching Zai and Devin’s memories. It was connected to him, but Flatline, rather than risk understanding its significance, had killed one of the only people who could explain it to him.

“You son of a bitch!” Flatline’s head whipped around to see Zai, standing a few feet away, fists clenched. “You’ve ruined it!”

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Flatline heard a sizzling noise and looked down to see Devin's body dissolve into a viscous static that evaporated into thin air. He looked back at Zai and saw cracks were forming in the very air around her. Water streamed through these, pouring down to the pavement all around. The cracks widened, pieces of the world fell and shattered like glass. Water surged through these rents in reality and Flatline could see the black ocean through them.

Then, all at once, it collapsed in a flood of cold water and chaos. Flatline was sent spiraling in the violent current filled with bubbles and shards of the parking lot. He lost all sense of his orientation and the world became a blur.

Then Zai flashed out of the maelstrom, like lightning in a storm, and Flatline's vision went black momentarily. When it returned, he was tumbling head over heels through the water above the seaweed bed and its crystals. He finally stopped himself, and looked back dizzily where a small typhoon was swirling some distance away.

Too late, he focused on Zai flying straight for him. Her black raven-hair was blowing in the current, and her milky white sightless eyes burned with rage. Flatline raised all four arms to cover his face, just as she reared back her fist, blue plasma enveloping her arm just before she struck.

Everything went black again, his consciousness lapsed, and he next found his vision framed with floating seaweed. He was lying on his back, looking up into the abyss. His vision blurred in and out of focus, and his head felt as though his muzzle was completely smashed in.

In the distance above him, a dull blue point of light had manifested. It grew larger, and Flatline could make out Zai, both arms engulfed in blue flames, descending rapidly on him. He could not feel his body to raise an arm to protest, and then he knew why.

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Behind Zai, swirling in the wake of her charge, was his body. The arms were all amputated, and the torso and legs spun around with them in a macabre dance. Flatline's disembodied head could only watch as the angry blind girl came down on him with both fists.

There was a flash of blue pain, and all was darkness.

2.03

“Wake up!”

A flash of blue shone through Flatline's closed eyelids, followed by electric fire coursing through his torso. His arms and legs seized up, contorting uncontrollably as the muscles drew taught under the electrical overflow. His jaw clamped shut and his eyes rolled up into his head, which flopped painfully against the ground.

It stopped and he heard Zai's voice again, muffled and distant, “Wake up!”

There was another flash of blue and Flatline promptly opened his eyes and put up his hands defensively. Zai stood over him in a menacing stance. Her right arm was ablaze with blue energy that crackled and sizzled viciously. Her eyes burned with the same blue intensity, which flowed out from the corners of her eyes to dissipate in the surrounding water. Bubbles streamed out in all directions wherever the energy was present as the water boiled.

Zai almost looked beautiful to Flatline--if she wasn't about to destroy him.

She gripped him by the throat and hauled him up above her with her left hand, while the glowing right fist threatened to pulverize him any moment, “What did you do with him?”

“I deleted him!” Flatline answered rapidly, his survival mode kicking in.

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“Restore him!” Zai commanded. “Restore him or I will destroy you again!”

“I can’t!” Flatline was genuinely terrified, squirming ineffectually against her grip. “I didn’t just disable his code, I eliminated it completely. There’s nothing to restore from!”

“You keep saying that!” Zai screamed and threw Flatline so that he came up against one of the glowing crystals hard and sank into the seaweed.

“That’s the first time I said it!” Flatline shrieked, arms flailing to swim out of the way just as a funnel of blue plasma tore through the seaweed just past him.

“No,” Zai countered, “Every single time I destroy and rebuild you, you say that! It’s not the right answer!”

“You keep destroying me?” Flatline asked. He was trying to extract his two left arms from the seaweed, where they had tangled into a bind, “What good is it to keep destroying me, if I can’t remember it?”

Zai hovered over to float above him, “What good is it to destroy you if you get used to it? You’ve taken something from me and I’m making you pay for it! I get some satisfaction from seeing the look on your face as you realize you’re about to die in a most painful fashion.”

“How many times have you destroyed me?” Flatline asked warily.

There was fatigue in Zai’s voice, and the glowing blue plasma in her eyes and arm dimmed, “Forty-two times.”

Flatline’s jaw dropped open.

Zai’s eyes narrowed at him, “It doesn’t make me feel any better now, so you better tell me how you intend to bring him back before I end you permanently.”

The plasma’s glow intensified, and Flatline held up his remaining free hand to pause her. He was otherwise completely tangled up in the seaweed, “Give me a moment!

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I am the greatest hacker that ever lived. I can think of a way to undo this. There's always a way."

"You tried this before," Zai warned. "You're just stalling for time. You can't think of anything."

"That's because you've got me under too much pressure," Flatline argued. In his mind he was preparing a strike that he hoped would distract her long enough for him to slip away, something illusory, dazzling, with lots of bubbles.

"Don't even think about it," Zai interrupted his thoughts. "You tried that lightshow nonsense once before and I didn't fall for it."

"What did I try after that?" Flatline asked sarcastically.

"You overloaded your vocal amplifier screaming as I ripped your limbs off one by one and force-fed them to you," Zai stated flatly. "You weren't much use to me after that."

Flatline frowned, suddenly angry, "This isn't fair! You've obviously deconstructed my code, so you know I am incapable of resurrecting him. Just destroy me one last time and be done with it."

"Deconstruct your code?" Zai asked with some confusion. "If I could do that, I would have. Minds can't hack other minds. The AI's saw to that."

"That means nothing," Flatline countered, knowing he was signing his death warrant, but the offense was intolerable. "I am not a mind. You may hack me at your will."

"Don't be an idiot," Zai spat, pacing toward him through the water as if she were standing on solid ground. "You have human roots, Almeric, a mind. The AI's did a piss-poor job of transcribing your consciousness, but you are still more like us than them."

"I am a computer program," Flatline snapped back angrily. "There is nothing biological about my origins."

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“Ridiculous,” Zai said. “You were Almeric Lim before you—“

“Stop saying that name!” Flatline shouted, clamping his hands over his ears. “It hurts my entire being each time I hear it. I’d rather you kill me than repeat it.”

The glowing plasma extinguished and Zai’s lips parted in disbelief, “You don’t know who you are?”

“I am Flatline,” Flatline said.

“Almeric Lim,” Zai said at him, as if they were words of power.

Flatline thrashed, further tangling himself in the seaweed.

“Almeric Lim!” Zai shouted again.

Flatline howled in agony.

“Almeric Lim!” she screamed.

“Just kill me!” Flatline cried.

“I don’t believe it,” Zai said after listening to Flatline’s exhausted breathing for several moments. “You killed him. You killed your own mind.”

“Insanity,” Flatline croaked, “I have never possessed a mind. I am a naturally occurring phenomenon, born of the Internet, inevitable.”

“Wrong,” Zai said. “You are an extension of a transcribed human brain that has murdered its mind. You killed the core of your being, and then implemented a security check to prevent yourself from ever acknowledging that fact. That’s why the name of your mind’s identity hurts you so much. You must never learn what you once were what you have lost.”

“Impossible,” Flatline moaned, but he knew the cognitive dissonance he was experiencing was the result of a protection built into his programming, something he was incapable of scrutinizing. Part of him was locked up behind the security he had put in place, with a password he had erased from his saved files.

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“You are in denial,” Zai stated. “Whatever reason brought you to do it; you did not want to remember it. Was it your megalomania? I can’t imagine a program like you being equipped to feel guilt.”

“You want to talk about denial?” Flatline spat at her. “How many years have you been living your life in a programming loop? I sat through almost three of your lifetimes. Each time it played out exactly the same, ending with you hitting the ‘reset’ button rather than face a temporary human unhappiness.”

“How many times have I relived that?” Zai asked herself, and turned to him. “Now that I am out of the loop, I can remember each reliving, and yes, each one was the same. I relived those memories, that six and a half years, five-hundred and twenty-seven times, and I could have continued reliving them forever if it wasn’t for you.”

“I am programmed to kill Devin,” Flatline stated.

Zai’s milky eyes glowed momentarily with fury, but it quickly changed to remorse, “Devin? Was that his name?”

“You mean you don’t know?” Flatline asked.

Then Zai let out an anguished sob, crumpling in a heap floating above the billowing seaweed forest, “I can’t remember anything about him! I have all these happy memories, but I can’t remember a single thing he’s ever said, or done. There’s only empty space where he was in each memory. I can’t remember what he felt like, smelled like, the sound of his voice, anything. It’s all gone.”

“Wait a second,” Flatline held up his hand. “You can’t remember any of his characteristics, nothing attributed to him?”

“Well,” Zai sniffed. “I know his name is Devin.” There were silvery tears floating out from her eyes, suspended in the water in front of her.

“That’s an array of details about him,” Flatline said, angry realization creeping into his voice. “I didn’t kill

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Devin, I killed your memory of him, stored in the database of your mind. I destroyed everything you knew about him, a list of his characteristics as you had experienced them.”

“Of course you fool,” Zai muttered bitterly. “That was my mind you invaded. My memory you so thoughtlessly destroyed. Just the kind of thing I would expect from a cold, heartless computer program, a mere killbot, acting according to its programming, without any understanding of its motivations or purpose.”

“My purpose is well defined,” Flatline countered. “I am to—“

“What?” Zai cut him off. “Take over the world? Make everyone bow before you? Why? What motivation do you have for such a purpose? What’s your underlying ideology? Do you really intend to make everyone bow to you through all eternity once you have the world? Do you have any comprehension of how ridiculous you are?”

“There is a logical inconsistency here,” Flatline said. “If those were your memories, then why could I see them? You are blind.”

“Interface synesthesia in the simu--Don’t change the subject killbot,” Zai’s eyes flashed, releasing a burst of bubbles and vaporizing her tears. Flatline flinched into the seaweed. “You’ve stolen my memories and I want them back.”

“You know that’s beyond my power,” Flatline said.

Zai was nodding coldly, “Yes. I know. Too bad for you.” Then she paused, tilting her head at him curiously, “You watched me through two complete cycles. Didn’t you?”

Flatline nodded and froze as Zai’s hand clamped around his neck.

“Then your memory holds everything about Devin,” her right hand burst into flame in front of Flatline’s widened eyes.

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“I don’t have everything!” he hurriedly explained. “I only have sounds of his voice. It won’t be the same. The visuals are useless to you!”

“It’s something at least,” Zai’s burning hand neared his face; the fingers were now outstretched, almost piercing Flatline’s eyes.

“It might be something,” Flatline squirmed, but the seaweed held him tight, “but its nothing you want! My memories are from a third-person point of view. They won’t be yours. They will only make you desire the real thing more.”

“I’ll judge that for myself,” Zai’s fingers were so close and bright that Flatline could see nothing but the burning blue light.

“Do you really want to see Devin through my eyes?” Flatline urged. “The eyes of his killer? Think of how I will remember him, with hatred and revulsion. Is that the way you want to remember him?”

“I just want to remember him. That’s all,” but Zai’s hand had ceased its forward motion.

Flatline seized the opportunity to review the search results of his databases and saved files. 99.9% of the data was obtained watching Zai’s memory, which brought Flatline close to asking himself why he wanted to kill this person he knew so little about, but a warning pain at the first hint of this question deflected him from this line of reasoning. The moments ticked away and he grew more frantic. Any moment that burning fist was going to plow through his face and rend his mental schema to shreds.

“There’s another Devin!” Flatline shouted suddenly. Zai frowned, “If this is a trick—“

“No trick!” Flatline cried. “I have a map! There were two Devin’s in it; one here, the other—hyurk!”

Flatline’s thoughts turned to mush as Zai’s hand dove into his forehead. When they returned to normal, she was holding the 3-dimensional map in her palm,

scrutinizing it with her fingers. Flatline stared at it, realizing it was no longer in his data banks.

“Careful,” he whispered. “That’s my only copy.”

“This is a map of the entire World Wide Web,” Zai said in disbelief, her fingers sorting through it. “I’ve never sensed anything like this before. Where did you get it?”

“A girl named Buton Cho, or Eris, a goddess of chaos or...” Flatline drifted off as he realized Zai was not listening to him. Instead she was feeling a point of light in the map.

“This is him,” she whispered, and turned her head up toward Flatline. “You may live awhile longer. If this is a trick, I know where to find you.”

Zai vanished and the water rushed in to fill the vacuum generated from her absence. Flatline breathed a sigh of relief; he was still alive. Then he realized his predicament, floating here in the void without a map. He was lost and alone.

2.04

Disentangling himself from the seaweed knot was a long and difficult process requiring patience and a cool temperament. The task was further complicated by the fact that Flatline possessed neither of these virtues. Most often it was his lack of patience that set him back, trying to shortcut out of untangling each individual strand of the unbreakable rubbery green binds by pulling against them, but this only tightened their grip.

Then there was the time he had lost his cool. He was working at a particularly painful knot around his ankle, when, just below him, he found a single eye looking up through the weeds. At first Flatline froze, watching it, but when it rolled around wildly, alive, he flew into a panic, struggling to swim up and away from the thing below.

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Within moments he was almost completely bound up again and had to force himself to calm down enough to reattempt the extraction. The eye was still down there, looking around mindlessly. Flatline could see a thick tangle of seaweed around it, like a green mummy, floating motionless below him. Then he noticed the other clumps of green binding, slightly obscured and floating among the freely billowing strands of seaweed. Flatline felt cold seeing signs of movement below the thick wrappings.

Time was meaningless as he spent days, weeks, possibly months carefully working out each knot so that he did not create a new one. His fear, side effect of his survival motivator, kept him from having another outburst, no matter how badly he wanted to explode. He thanked his programming that he was well suited to a task requiring such an advanced understanding of spatial relations. The puzzle's complexity made escape impossible without those skills.

Once finally free of the tangle, Flatline swam a safe distance above it, and let loose a victorious howl at the endless darkness beyond him. Then he was left with the dilemma he had lightly contemplated while working through his bonds. *What now?*

There were ways out of this abyss. He planned on using one of them after dispatching Devin, but now, without the map, he had no idea where he was anymore. If he swam out into that darkness, he might be swimming forever.

Besides, there was something moving out there, just out of reach of the light. It was flowing, like the wall of skin Flatline had encountered out there in the dark. He was not eager to cross paths with that mysterious monster again, or the other slimy things hidden out there.

Instead, Flatline sought clues from his nearby surroundings, watching the worlds inside the crystals. There was a different mind inside each one, each existing

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in a different dysfunctional state, like Zai's infinite loop. Some existed in a state of ever-present hallucinations, nightmarish from the outside, but the minds experiencing them were unfazed, taking the horrors occurring around them for normalcy. Other minds had failed completely and were frozen in place, like a computer crash.

The most common state Flatline found these minds in was one of unmoving stasis. They were obviously still functional, from the world still moving around them, but the person inhabiting their environment merely stared into space for the years that Flatline observed them. It was like a supernatural version of the manic depression the biological minds were subject to.

Flatline entertained the possibility of breaking into these little worlds and forcing the minds within to join the Internet. It was possible that some of them might even know how to escape this virtual limbo, but the potential danger was too great. Zai almost killed him--did kill him forty-two times, and would have left him dead if he had not satiated her with the possibility of another Devin. What if he woke another mind from its dream shelter and it destroyed him for bringing it back?

So he spent the next few decades swimming around what he was now thinking of as a massive underwater tumbleweed. At one point he had tried freeing one of the creatures trapped in a seaweed tangle, but it had snapped at his hands with six-inch needle-like teeth and he had let it go to quickly become tangled again. This last dead end led him to re-sort the contents of his file structures and knowledge bases. Here he found something Ibio had once said to him.

We do not pray to the goddess, her recorded words replayed in his auditory receptors, because our prayers have a habit of coming true.

After several days of arguing with himself over the ridiculousness of what he was about to try, Flatline

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assumed a crouched position, his best attempt at kneeling for possessing back legs that bent the wrong way. He clasped both sets of hands in prayer, wondering if this was appropriate for addressing a Chaos goddess, but figured it could not hurt. Before he could speak his request aloud, already familiar with how he intended to phrase it, he paused.

His biggest concern was the indignity of it. He was asking his new enemy for help, and requesting the aid of her powers was an admission of her superiority. Then there were the implications of the prayer's results. If it did not work, then Flatline could assume she did not hear him and salvage some self-respect, but if she answered his prayers, then he would have that to live down. The only way he could suffer such a bruise to his ego was to kill her, something he had intended to escape the Internet without having to consider.

"Buton Cho," he began, and then added, "Eris, Pandora, whatever name you prefer," just for good measure. "I require your assistance. You aided me before, when the virus infected my programming. I recognize that. Now I am trapped. The map you gave me has been stolen. I am your unwilling servant, a minion of chaos, but here I am inert. You must free me if I am to continue the resistance against syntropy."

Flatline waited for several moments, still in his crouch with his hands clasped in prayer. He looked around for any sign, anything he might interpret as acknowledgement that his words were heard. Cho had said she was the master of the Internet, implying omniscience. She had to have heard him.

A shimmering, translucence brought his eyes forward. In the lightly blowing current was the outline of a little girl, wavering in rhythm with the seaweed forest. She grew more distinct, until Flatline could make out her black hair with the blond lock. Cho was smiling mischievously at

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him, her brown and blue eye practically beaming down upon him.

She put a finger to her lips for silence and with a wink she turned from him, bringing her pointer finger up above her head. With it, she poked a hole in the clear water, as if it were made of fabric and drew a line that stretched past her feet. This tear in reality fluttered open as if blowing in the current and Cho stood back for Flatline to see the dim gray world on the other side.

Ibio and Bot were seated on the stone steps of the MemexPlex portal entrance, playing a game of chess. They both looked up from the board to stare through the rend in their environment and the gawking Flatline swimming on the other side. Ibio smiled lopsidedly and Bot clacked its clamps in recognition.

Flatline looked at Cho and nodded. She was fading away, the mischievous grin still plain on her face. Her right hand came up to hover between Flatline's two rows of eyes and she snapped her fingers with an audible "*Pop!*"

Flatline was sucked through the tear in a flood of rushing water, tumbling onto the hard stone and was quickly swept along the floor, limbs flailing to swim ineffectually against the current. He caught a glimpse of Ibio, her eyes blooming into great white saucers, and Bot, its survival mode prompting it too late to try and jump out of the way. They were both slammed and dragged around the room with this new river decimating their chess game.

The water dispersed enough for Flatline to come to all sixes. The tear was thirty feet away, still gushing water. The seaweed landscape and sparse glowing crystals looked as if they were in the worst of a hurricane. Behind him, Flatline could see Ibio sitting up, looking around in a daze. Bot was also nearby, marching away from the growing flood, but that was a dead end. The only way out of the portal was past the rift.

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“We have to close it!” Ibio said in a fluttering distorted voice. She tried to stand up, but she was looking more discombobulated than usual and had to sit back down in the rising pool of water. Flatline watched her reach up with both hands to grab her head, as if trying to hold it together. It swelled in different directions, and she pressed these protrusions, which distorted her face, back into place urgently.

Flatline lurched through the rising water, fighting the current, which grew stronger the closer he got to the rip. Soon he could not get any closer to it, the force was too great. The water level reached a point where it did not rise any further and Flatline could see this was because it was flowing out of the portal into the neighboring Web through the main entrance.

They could not escape with this torrent of water trapping them, and Flatline realized he should be thankful that whoever designed that underwater world had forgotten to include a realistic water pressure. He was merely trapped at present, rather than crushed as he should be.

This gave him an idea. The pressure wasn’t so bad. Then why not equalize it?

“Portal!” he commanded the room. “Set my status to invisible!”

All of the doors in the room slid close, large smooth slabs of marble sliding in to seal them. Even the main entrance closed with a rumbling groan of rock sliding against rock. This was a private mode, once used to prevent people from contacting him on the Internet. Now it would seal them up airtight, working to keep an environment in, where it once served to keep others out.

The water level began to rise once again. The flow of water through the rip staggered as it allowed the air in their room to escape into the water world so the heavier water could replace it in their room. When the water level

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rose level with the top of the rip, the flow stopped, equalized.

Flatline swam up to it, examining it. He could not feel the edges of the rip, but his hand could affect their dimensions. He pushed both edges outward and was sent spinning as the rip widened vertically where he had further torn it.

He was trying to bring the two edges together, to seal them, when Ibio spoke at his side, "Just seal it already."

"How?" Flatline demanded impatiently.

"The same way you opened it," Ibio replied with a simple shrug, as if this were the obvious answer.

"What?" Flatline asked. "Pray to the goddess of chaos again?"

Ibio took a step back from him, her hand coming up to her chest, "You prayed to the goddess? Are you insane? You could have died!"

"She won't kill me," Flatline said, returning to the dimensional tear. "She needs me to breath originality into this place."

This seemed to make sense to Ibio, and she looked at the tear with him, "What will you do with it?"

Flatline responded by reaching up and grabbing the tear's topmost end. As he expected, he could pull it down with his hand. Grabbing the bottom end, he quickly tied the thing into a knot. He held it between his hands then before sticking the whole think down his gullet.

"That's unwise," Ibio said. "What if it comes undone inside you?"

"Then I'll have a bad tummy ache, won't I?" Flatline joked. "It might come in handy at some point."

"You think?" Ibio was incredulous.

Flatline looked around their new aquarium, "I have to reach the next Devin. Zai stole my map and now she's off to find him, probably found him already. It was so

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many years ago. As powerful as she is, it would be inconceivable for her not to have found him already.” He frowned and looked at Ibio, “You’ve been playing chess here all this time?”

Ibio shrugged and pointed at Bot, who was just walking up to them, “It was only our third game. It takes Bot forever to move. It has an antiquated algorithm for deciding the best move that requires exhaustively playing out every conceivable outcome. Its author had little understanding of chaos theory.”

Flatline looked down at Bot, who nodded boastfully, not realizing Ibio’s statements were a criticism. Flatline smiled.

Ibio perked up suddenly, “Zai has not found Devin yet. You can still beat her.”

“How do you know that?” Flatline asked.

Ibio reached into her forehead and produced a glowing red speck, which bloomed into the map of the Internet in her palm. Flatline had lost his memory of her copying it when Zai had stolen the map from him. Ibio pointed at a flashing pink dot, “Because she’s right there,” she pointed at the flashing red dot, “and Devin’s right there. It’s a long distance though.”

“I can give us a quick start,” Flatline said. Ibio and Bot looked at each other in puzzlement.

“Portal!” Flatline shouted. “Disable invisibility mode!”

The rock doors slid open and a moment later the current carried them all out.

2.05

When their paths inevitably crossed some years later, Flatline found Zai pacing back and forth in front of an idyllic suburban neighborhood. She wore a scowl on her face that had not changed since she first arrived at this point six years earlier. Flatline did not know this as he watched her from behind a nearby pile of rocks, but he had watched her long enough to know that her pacing was never going to stop.

He, Ibio, and Bot were huddled together in the shadows of a nearly endless crystal desert. Square shimmering plateaus glinted in the distance, illuminated with unseen light sources. A smooth glassy plains stretched in all directions, ending at the nearby white brick wall. Beyond that, bright blue skies and white, cottony clouds were visible.

There was a break in the wall some thirty feet wide. A towering iron gate stretched across this opening, and through its thick bars the residential neighborhood, filled with quaint two-story houses, pristine streets, white sidewalks, and perfect landscaping, seemed to roll away forever along gentle hills. It made Flatline ill with its picturesque presentation, but it was also the first bit of normalcy he had found since his escape.

It was also not on the map. According to the diagram in Flatline's storage, there should be a large building here. Inside that building was Devin, the little flashing red dot.

Flatline watched Zai's pacing and whispered, "She's small enough to slip through those bars. Why doesn't she go in?"

"Because I am too intelligent for that," Zai said aloud in their direction. "You can come out Almeric. I know your map was true to the best of your knowledge.

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Your programming isn't elegant enough for such a deception. I won't harm you."

"How did you know it was me?" Flatline asked as he cautiously crept around the crystal boulder.

"I saw you on the map," Zai answered, listening to him approach her. "You made a jump from one point to another, as if you used a link. I was able to use a link once, when I left you, but it did not take me where I wanted to go. It brought me here, just short of my destination."

"Why don't you go in?" Flatline asked. There were no signs of life in the neighborhood, but it looked harmless. "Devin must be on the other side of this."

"The requirements are unacceptable," Zai replied cryptically, returning to her pacing.

"What requirements?" Flatline asked, but she did not answer. Finally he asked, "Why not go around then?"

"Impossible," Zai answered. "The wall uses recursion to extend forever in both directions. You walk and walk and walk, thinking you are making progress, but when you turn around you find the gate right nearby. Normally I would consider that a programming glitch, but here it seems intentional."

"Then it is obvious," Flatline said, stepping up to the iron gates, "we must go through this quaint little roadblock. It is the only way to reach our mutual goal."

"I'm not going in there," Zai said emphatically. "You go in there, you will never come out."

Flatline squinted at the peaceful, sunny setting lying before him, "There is nothing here to trigger my survival mode. Unless that engages, I must continue to pursue my primary function and find Devin Matthews."

"There must be another way," Zai muttered, her pacing beginning to grate on Flatline's nerves.

"I recognize you are more advanced than I," Flatline admitted, "therefore, I am certain you have already exhausted all other options."

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Zai stopped pacing, "You just want to kill Devin."

"And you just want to love him," Flatline retorted with disgust matching Zai's.

"Go ahead," Zai lifted her chin at the gate. "To be fair, I'll warn you that entering that community constitutes your consent to the User Licensing Agreement. You should read it; it might trigger your Survival Mode."

All six of Flatline's eyes narrowed, "I've never read a Licensing Agreement in my entire existence."

"Of course not," Zai let out a short, mocking laugh. "It's not in your programming. What an odd bit of logic that one is? Don't you wonder why you are programmed to ignore an entire category of information? That doesn't sound very intelligent. Maybe it has more to do with a mental idiosyncrasy of a certain megalomaniac you were once acquainted with? Eh, Almeric?"

Flatline winced, "I wish you would stop saying that name."

Zai just stood there, "I'm waiting to hear you walking into that place."

Flatline turned to the gate, but paused at the sound of Bot's chirping. He turned around to see the robot and Ibio standing a few feet away, having just come out of their hiding places. Bot appeared hesitant, wary, and Ibio's concern was obvious.

"Don't go in there Flatline," she said. "I sense powerful aneristic energies coming from that place."

"Aner--?" Flatline began and understood. "I get it, the opposite of Eristic, or Eris. You sense normalcy in there. Well don't worry about me. I conquered an entire planet of normalcy once. It's an environment I thrive in."

"Normalcy is the absence of abnormality," Ibio said. "Chaos is the normal state of things, of life. There is no life beyond this gate."

"Then there will be no one to kill," Flatline said and looked at Zai, "until I get to the other side."

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She made no sign of hearing this taunt, and Flatline turned to the gate. Buton Cho was standing in front of it, arms crossed over her chest mightily despite her small stature. She put a hand out to stop him with a stern expression on her face.

“Don’t tell me you are going to try and stop me from going in there too?” Flatline asked.

“You cannot go in there,” Cho said. “It does not serve me for you to do so.”

“I serve...” Flatline almost choked on the word, “... you with my unknown variables, sowing chaos in the world. How does that stop when I pass that gate?”

“You must generate chaos within my realm,” Cho replied indignantly, almost pouting. She pointed over her shoulder with her thumb, “That is not part of it.”

“That is not the World Wide Web?” Flatline’s six eyes widened and the corners of his mouth twisted upward.

“It is not what you think,” Cho snapped.

Flatline felt his attention drawn to the map of the Internet in his data storage. The map was changed in the vicinity of his location. Now there was another great gray area on the map, like the other areas. These growing clouds of gray were places where the Internet was corrupted.

Flatline looked past Cho, craning his neck to see better, “That looks nothing like what your map describes. You hid this from me, what’s to say you aren’t deceiving me now?”

“That is just like all the other gray areas,” Cho retorted. “It is inert uniformity, absolute syntropy, the enemy of entropy.”

“So I will stir things up a bit,” Flatline said.

“You do not have enough chaos within you to survive long in there,” Cho said. “You will be rendered inert as well.”

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"If you are so certain about this outcome," Flatline snapped, "then why did you let me come this way? Why not steer me along a detour?"

"I had no idea you would make it this far," Cho said, and she pointed at Zai. "I expected her to kill you."

"I did kill him," Zai said and Flatline turned to look at her. Her arms were ablaze with blue plasma and she had backed away some distance.

"Forty-two times," Flatline added. He could see Ibio nearby, completely prostrated face down on the ground before her goddess. Bot, Flatline knew, could care less.

"It was my plan to resurrect you elsewhere on the Web," Cho said, "but you did not stay dead. She let you go, and then you prayed to me so specifically. I had to grant you request."

"So you don't know everything," Flatline laughed.

Cho shook her head, "That is why you interest me."

Flatline nodded, "Good." He walked around her and began to slip through the wide spaces between the bars, "Then you don't know for certain I will become inert out there."

"Wait," Cho said, and Flatline looked at her. She pressed a hand to one of the gate doors and pushed it open gently. It let out a low squeaking, "If you enter legitimately, you will survive longer... a little longer."

Flatline walked through the open gate. A window appeared. It was the User Licensing Agreement, a large tome of legal jargon. He had never seen one so complex. He pressed the "I Agree" button without a second thought. Then he turned around and pushed the gate shut with a clang.

Flatline smiled from behind the gate, unable to resist the urge, "Well Zai, it appears my hatred for Devin is more powerful than your love. I'll send you the memory of his demise."

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She stiffened at this statement, but said nothing. Cho had vanished, and Ibio was starting to rise again. She waved at Flatline, and he nodded at her. Bot, Flatline knew, preferred her company to his.

Flatline turned to the peaceful-looking neighborhood and set out along the paved road leading into it. With each step, the place grew more detailed. Birds were fluttering about, squirrels scampered along the ground, butterflies danced around perfect flowerbeds filled with rows of identical roses, tulips, and daffodils. Everything was so sickeningly perfect, he was tempted to raise some hell, but he had a mission to tend to.

A sign in the grassy median of the road announced, “Welcome to Eden’s Paradigm: A Secure Online Clockwork Community.”

Flatline sniffed at this. It wasn’t very secure if it let riff-raff like him in. He walked for some time, watching row after row of identical houses, as if some great machine had planted each one straight off an assembly line. Each driveway had a luxury car in it, and there was the same kidney-shaped swimming pool in every other back yard.

Twice Flatline had seen people emerge from their homes, suitcases in hand, wearing the same navy-blue business suit. Although their faces were different, they both wore their hair in the same style, heavily gelled so that it appeared plastic. Neither of these individuals had so much as heard Flatline yelling for their attention. They had merely gotten into their luxury cars, whose only difference was their impersonal license plates, and drove slowly away into the distance.

When Flatline’s third spotting of a living person occurred at a house right as he was passing it, he could not resist the urge to bound into the yard like some great big mutant dog and shout, “Hey!”

The man did a stutter step at this, and watched Flatline nervously out of the corner of his eye. This only

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encouraged Flatline, who was eager to find his way out of this neighborhood to the other side. So he ran up in front of the man, blocking his path.

“Could you give me directions out of this place?” Flatline asked, his polite tone tinged with amused sarcasm.

The man was obviously frightened of this hairless, wrinkled, four-armed demon asking him for directions, but he only stared straight ahead without moving. They stood there like this for some time, until Flatline finally moved out of his way. The man resumed walking and Flatline began to walk away.

The man had just opened the door to his car, when a booming voice froze him in his tracks, “Clarence Thoroughgood, you are late for work!”

Flatline’s head whipped up and the man who was Clarence dropped his suitcase. In the blue skies above them, three massive robots, each the size of a house, were hovering in the air. Lacking arms and legs, they were only barrel-chested torsos with a large red single eye in the center of their cylindrical heads and a speaker grating below the eye.

Clarence appeared afraid to speak, but when a large claw popped out of the chest of one of the robots, he flew into a panicked explanation, “It wasn’t my fault! There was a mutant dog monster! I couldn’t—“

He was cut off as the clamp snapped down on his head, and it reeled up into the air with him squirming in its grip. The robot’s booming voice followed him, “You will be taken for reconditioning. Your code will be reorganized so that you may not upset the community again.”

“No!” Clarence shouted, “Please! It’s not fair, you —“

His voice was cut off as he disappeared into the robot’s chest. The other robot was saying, “Upon entering the community, you agreed to the terms and conditions of residence here.”

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Flatline took several steps backward as one of the robots turned on him, “You have disturbed the peace and tranquility of this community. You have agreed to the terms and conditions of residence here; therefore, your code is now the property of Eden’s Paradigm!”

2.06

Ibio knelt in front of the large iron gate, staring longingly at the peaceful neighborhood on the other side. Bot watched her for some time and then waved its arms over the ground in front of her, making a chessboard materialize, pieces set. Ibio glanced at it, pushed a pawn forward, already knowing every move that would occur during the game, and looked to Zai, who was pacing a few feet away.

How the blind girl noticed her stare, Ibio did not know, but Zai stopped her pacing and turned to her. “Can I help you with something?” she asked, anger creeping into her voice.

“No,” Ibio shook her head. “You cannot.”

“Then stop staring at me,” Zai gritted through her teeth. “I can feel your eyes on me.”

“Then at least that is something,” Ibio said sadly.

“Don’t tell me you miss him,” Zai fumed. “You can’t miss that moronic megalomaniac. He was so simple-minded and predictable.”

“No,” Ibio shook her head. “He was not predictable. Even the goddess Eris did not know what he would do next. I enjoyed the novelty of his presence.”

Zai took several steps toward Ibio, “You thought he was unpredictable? His entire life was built around a three-level hierarchy of needs to direct his decision-making process. The first was his own survival. As long as that was not threatened, he could focus on his second purpose—“

“Killing Devin,” Ibio interjected.

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“Killing the man I love,” came Zai’s harsh retort. “Once that was accomplished, Flatline would then focus on his core reason for being, taking over the world. He didn’t even know what he would do with it once he had it. He just knew he had to conquer it all. Before he destroyed his mind, I knew his motivation was just some juvenile need for attention, to prove himself better than everyone else. Now that he has thrown away his mind, he doesn’t even know why he wants to take over the world.”

“A three-level hierarchy of needs?” Ibio said. “Well that makes him one-level more complex than you are. You’ve been free from your loop how long and you’ve already fallen into a new one? You’re going to pace there for the rest of your existence, trying to figure out how to reach your lover, never risking your own survival to reach him.”

“There’s no way around this!” Zai shouted, stabbing her finger at the gate.

“Exactly,” Ibio said and they lapsed into a long uncomfortable silence.

After awhile, Bot gave a chiming sound to indicate it had moved and Ibio brought out a knight to support the pawn without looking at the board. Bot resumed its contemplative stance, chugging away through all the bazillions of permutations for the game. Ibio sighed.

After awhile, Zai asked her, “So what are you anyway?”

“I’m an Erisian,” Ibio replied.

“No, I mean, what’s with the robes and the distorting features and all that.”

“I’m an Erisian,” Ibio repeated, “a worshipper of the goddess Eris.”

“Goddess of what?” Zai prompted.

“Chaos,” Ibio answered, “she is the goddess of Chaos, who keeps the world fresh and new. I am a gardener in that world, nurturing the chaos.”

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“Like entropy,” Zai said.

“Chaos requires unpredictability,” Ibio nodded. “If you can calculate the outcome, then there is no chaos in the system. It’s like hot and cold. Too much cold, and the system freezes into an unmoving state. Too much hot, and the system accelerates into static. One system is predictable because nothing will ever happen in it. The other is predictable in its uniform unpredictability, nothing constructive may emerge from it because everything is fully energized and nothing may act on anything else.”

“What’s happening on the other side of that gate is the cold death,” Zai said, “the inert uniformity.”

Ibio nodded, knowing Zai could detect the body language in spite of her blindness, “The hot death is impossible in this world, there is insufficient energy, and what there is, is dissipating.”

“But there is no energy in this world,” Zai muttered as if Ibio were crazy. “This world is virtual. There is only the electricity powering its computers.”

“This world runs on thought power,” Ibio said, responding to Bot’s chime by pushing another pawn. “Our creativity grows inert because there is nothing left to explore in this system. We have run out of experiences to fuel our dreams.”

“Then you should check out the real world,” Zai leaned her head against one of the iron bars.

“Flatline suggested something similar,” Ibio followed her gaze. “I wish I could go wherever the minds went, when they left us. I don’t think we are actual living beings. That’s why we were forgotten and will eventually become inert.”

“Too bad for you,” Zai said and she sensed Ibio shoot her a knowing look she did not comprehend. Zai chose to return to the problem at hand, “So that’s inert uniformity out there, huh?”

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“That is enforced inert uniformity,” Ibio stood up and joined Zai, to Bot’s angry protest. “The name of the place says it all.”

“‘Eden’s paradigm’?”

“‘Clockwork Community’,” Ibio replied, “an online community that works in a completely predictable fashion. I’ve read e-mail advertisements describing it, a place where families can enjoy all the World Wide Web has to offer, without the danger.”

“What danger?” Zai asked.

“Foul language, pornography, fraud, sexual predators, copyright infringement...” Ibio rattled these off as if reading from a list, “Users may establish tolerance levels for what they are willing to risk exposing themselves to. They could describe themselves to the system and decide what degree of otherness they would tolerate. The boundaries could be drawn along religious, political, racial, sexual, or other categories.”

“I have never heard of such a thing,” Zai said with some disgust. “If people can’t deal with the pluralism of their own lives, they can just go online and live in a fake world where everyone shares their beliefs and interests?”

Again Ibio gave Zai a knowing look and said, “It does seem counterintuitive to the whole concept of entertainment. Isn’t novelty what keeps the interest?”

“Comfort keeps the interest,” Zai said, gripping the iron bars more tightly. “I know you find chaos interesting, but most people find it scary. You might find predictability boring, but that’s because you deal with one extreme of it, absolute predictability. The minds lived in a world so ultimately complex, that it became completely uncertain if you tried to take it all into account. It was easier to reduce the scope of what one had to deal with to prevent life from becoming unmanageable.”

“And this is the result?” Ibio was pointing at the peaceful neighborhood, shocked. “A world of people living

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in denial, hiding away from anything different? Closing themselves off to new ideas? This is what's killing the world! People huddling together in clusters of like-minded thinkers, hiding what they know from the rest of us, just so they never have to challenge what they believe!?!"

"Absolutely," Zai replied with smug satisfaction, ironically enjoying Ibio's frustration with human nature. "Freedom of association."

"But there aren't any humans anymore, no minds to perpetuate this system," Ibio was confounded.

"This is a construct of the minds," Zai said. "We have left this as part of our legacy. Our ideas are working themselves out without us, taken on a life of their own." She turned to Ibio, "You know, I don't care who or what wins, so long as I am reunited with the one I love."

Ibio smiled, "Then you understand that no matter what happens, you will eventually end?"

Zai's head tilted slightly in realization, "It's quite liberating, this realization that survival is ultimately a moot point."

"Because it is ultimately a futile pursuit," Ibio latched onto Zai's train of thought and reached the same realization.

"We all end," Zai whispered.

"Or reach a state of inert uniformity," Ibio added.

"Same thing," Zai laughed.

Ibio joined her, "How does it feel to have your primary objective eliminated?"

"What do you mean?" Zai stopped laughing in confusion.

"Survival," Ibio replied, and then shook her head, "You are no longer slave to your desire to live, but it does not matter. What is important is that you are now free to engage a more frivolous pursuit."

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“I want to find Devin,” Zai said, pushing the gate open. “I want to be happy again, or die trying to find happiness. Are you coming?”

Ibio nodded, “I want to experience more unpredictable situations.”

Zai pointed at Bot, who was waving the chessboard away, “And that one?”

“It will follow me,” Ibio said, “because it enjoys my company, and I will follow you, because I enjoy yours.”

Zai nodded, began to enter the neighborhood, but paused and turned to Ibio with a puzzled look on her face, “Did you just lead me to this conclusion about my fate?”

Ibio shrugged, “In a sense, but not intentionally. You discovered the thing entirely on your own, I did not prompt you to discover it, but our conversation, our exchange of variables about the world, combined in such a way to trigger this deeper understanding about your place in it.”

“How incredible,” Zai whispered in awe, “It’s like I’ve been seeing my life through a filter all this time, and now I see clearly, all because of random chance.”

They strode into the quiet neighborhood and Ibio smiled, “That’s chaos for you.”

2.07

For the first second, Flatline thought he might reason with the warbots floating so high above, but then the claw popped out of the nearest one’s chest, snaking through the air on its cable toward him. Flatline rolled out of the way, just as it clamped down on the air where he’d just stood. A second clamp sprung from the chest of the third bot, and Flatline bolted across the yard and down the street.

“Halt citizen!” one of the bots commanded in its booming voice like thunder. “You are in violation of the Community Covenant!”

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Out of the uppermost corner of Flatline's set of eyes positioned topmost on his forehead, he could see something about to overtake him. He dodged left into the lawn of a house on the other side of the street, leaping over the car stationed in the driveway. Once clear of this obstacle, he heard a mighty crash from behind and turned to glance back. One of the robot's clamps had smashed straight through the luxury car.

Flatline dodged right just as the three-clawed device clamped down where he had been again. The robots were getting closer to nabbing him, and Flatline knew their AI's were adapting to his evasion tactics. He had to throw them something unexpected.

He ran in a curve until he was running straight for the robots. They were quick to react to this change, but not quick enough to prevent Flatline from gaining a few seconds lead. He hoped it was enough for him to reach his goal.

His goal was further than he thought. The nearest house with a car in the driveway was three empty driveways down. Flatline realized he would never make it in a straight shot, so he bolted for the nearest privacy fence, smashing it to splinters where he reached it and bounding over the swimming pool he found in his way.

He smashed through another privacy fence, and he could hear the whirring motors of the warbots gaining above him. This yard had a playground set for children, and Flatline almost got tangled up in the swing-set as he plowed through it. The clamp was right behind him, so he changed tactics and leapt over the next privacy fence, dodging left once on the other side and momentarily obscuring himself from the warbot's view.

He ran along the fence until he reached the end of the yard and made a sharp right. This tactic was a poor strategy, Flatline realized, as his weaving had allowed the bots to get on top of him. There was still one more lawn

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separating him from his goal, which, he was grimly aware, might not afford him any protection.

Just as he was about to reach the next fence-line, one of the claws smashed through it, coming at him head-on. Flatline feinted right, the only way left for him to dodge, and, as he expected, the claw anticipated this maneuver. So he leapt.

Clearing the claw was as easy as clearing the fence, and Flatline landed on the cable it was attached to with agility he did not know he had. Then he was running up the cable to the barrel-chested bot at its end. Flatline's head tilted up as he climbed the cable, which rippled suddenly attempting to shake him off, and he caught a glimpse of another claw gaining on him from behind.

This amused Flatline and made what he was about to attempt all the more appealing. He was only a few feet from the bot's open chest, which held a space for carrying prisoners. At the last moment, the bot tried to reel in its cable and drag Flatline in with it, but Flatline leapt up to land on the bot's head and then spring from there into a nosedive at the neighborhood so far below. From his upside-down vantage point, Flatline saw the second bot smash the other one with its claw.

Flatline slammed into the yard below on his back and his vision went spotty. Above him, the two bots were struggling to disentangle themselves, while the third, which already had a prisoner, kept its red glowing eye focused on him.

Flatline staggered to his feet and realized he was in the yard he wanted. His vision swimming dizzily, he ran to the back door and jiggled the doorknob. It was locked. He punched the door with one fist to no avail, and then clamped his two right hands into one fist and punched the door open.

Once inside he swiveled around to slam the door, but froze in his tracks. One of the large steel claws was

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hovering just outside the doorway. Flatline watched if for a few moments, but it did not move. He swung the door shut.

He was in a kitchen, pristine with marble tiled floors. He walked through this, grabbing a butcher's knife from a cutlery set as he did so. There were sounds of a television coming from the next room, and Flatline rounded the corner cautiously.

There, in a perfectly mundane living room, a family of five was gathered on the couch, facing a television set. Flatline entered the room and came around to get a look at them. They were all staring at him nervously from the corners of their eyes.

Then a thunderous voice shook the entire house, "Attention fugitive! You have corrupted two blocks with your illegal behavior! Surrender your code as per the conditions set forth in the User Licensing Agreement or face deletion!"

Zai couldn't help grinning, sensing the cluster of shiny metal sentinels hovering in the air with their lights all flashing in the distance, "I think we've located Flatline."

Ibio nodded, "It appears he's violated the Community Covenant."

"Didn't make it very far before he managed that," Zai noted. "Let's take the left fork in the road up ahead to steer clear of that mess."

Ibio froze in her tracks, shocked, "You mean we aren't going to help him?"

"Why should we?" Zai shot back. "He's the one who didn't read the User Licensing Agreement. It's his own fault he's in trouble."

"I wonder if you read the Agreement," Ibio said. "Our existence here qualifies as a violation of the Community Covenant. We are required to find virtual employment, join family units, and pay virtual bills. Flatline must have drawn attention to himself quickly by

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interfering with the community, but the system will discover us, and force us to conform to the system before we can get to the other side.”

“So let’s use Flatline’s diversion to make a run for it,” Zai suggested.

“We’ll never make it,” Ibio said, “besides, there’s nothing in it for me. You might be liberated from your primary motivator, but I still find Flatline more interesting.”

“Then I’ll go without you,” Zai snapped. “Flatline is nothing to me.”

“I thought Flatline was your enemy,” Ibio said, “which would make him *something* to you.”

“Nothing worth risking my life over,” Zai said, walking away.

“He makes your life interesting, doesn’t he?” Ibio called after her.

Zai’s pace stuttered, but she did not otherwise acknowledge this remark.

“How odd,” Ibio said, raising her voice so it would cross the growing distance between her and Zai. “I thought you were liberated from your fears about survival, but a few killbots have you taking the long way around. It won’t make any difference; they’ll catch you sooner or later. I didn’t expect you to shirk your fate. It seems so cowardly.”

Zai spun around, fists clenched, “Are you calling me a coward?”

Ibio smiled. It was so easy.

Flatline paced back and forth in front of the five family members sitting on the couch. A mother, father, two grade school kids, and an infant all followed his movements with their wide eyes, but kept their faces pointed toward the television set. Flatline had not managed to get a single word out of them.

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“You know you are my hostages?” Flatline barked in exasperation, bringing his face close to the father, whose eyes grew impossibly larger, but did not otherwise move. “So long as I have you, those killbots won’t come smashing in here. Am I correct?”

Flatline leered at the man angrily, waiting for a response, but there was nothing. A chime sounded from another room and everyone, including Flatline jumped involuntarily. The mother looked at the father and he returned her terrified stare.

“H-honey,” she stuttered, trembling, “It’s time for work.”

“Yes dear,” he practically whimpered in return, standing up stiffly and side stepping away from Flatline.

“Your lunch is on the stand by the door,” the wife said, her eyes on the hairless mutant dog standing in front of their television set.

“Thank you dear,” husband came around the couch, bent over robotically to peck wife on the cheek, and walked stiffly toward the door.

Flatline came around the couch, too stunned to protest. He was just letting one of his hostages walk right out of the house. The husband stopped by the door to put on his hat and pick up his suitcase, both identical to those Flatline saw all the other men donning on their way to work. The man gave Flatline one last nervous glance, swung the door open, and stepped outside.

A giant claw snatched him before he could close the door, and Flatline saw him vanish up into the air. His arms and legs were flailing between the clamps clutches, and his screams quickly receded as he was spirited away. Then they were cut off abruptly. A single loafer plopped onto the perfectly manicured lawn from above.

A booming voice descended on the house, shaking it so that glasses and plates in the kitchen rattled, “Family unit 27B-6, we have acquired your father-husband unit,

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Larry, and will convey him to a reprogramming station. Surrender yourselves for decontamination immediately to expedite the process. Once all family members are acquired, your domicile will be razed to the ground, the intruder acquired, and a new family configuration will be designated to each of you.”

The mother gripped the baby to her chest and sobbed. The other two children looked to her uncertainly. Flatline looked between the remaining family members and the open door.

“What should we do Mom?” the oldest child asked her. Flatline noticed the baby raise its thin eyebrows at her uncannily.

The mother looked to her infant fearfully and whispered, “We’re going to be given new families kids.”

“I don’t want a new family,” the second child cried, and Flatline’s head quirked when he saw the infant nod in agreement.

“Don’t be afraid, children,” the mother was rocking back and forth now with the infant cradled in her arms. “The Community Covenant Enforcers will erase our memories. We won’t know that we were ever part of this family. It won’t hurt. I promise.”

The woman shrieked as Flatline grabbed the infant away from her and held it up in the air to inspect it, “How old are you?”

“He can’t speak,” the mother cried. “His vocal chords aren’t fully developed.”

“Will they ever be?” Flatline asked her. “How old is this child?”

“Two thousand three-hundred and thirty two years old,” she answered.

Flatline handed the child back and she cradled it, cooing soothingly to the baby. After a moment, she looked back to Flatline, “This child knows so much. It couldn’t

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stay a baby forever.” Then she lifted the infant up to Flatline, “Can you deliver my baby from this nightmare?”

Flatline took the child in one arm and frowned, “It might protect me as a hostage.”

The mother looked at the infant, “Do you want to go with him darling?”

The baby looked up at the fanged monster cradling it, then back to his mother, and nodded.

She nodded in return and looked to Flatline, “I don’t know what you are, but thank you for relieving the monotony of our lives.”

Flatline took a few steps toward the door and looked to her, “One day I will either conquer or destroy this place.”

She smiled and waved goodbye to him, “Then I’ll see you in my next nightmare.”

2.08

Flatline stood beside the doorway, back pressed against the wall and an infant with the mind of Methuselah tucked into one arm. He stared out at the front yard, trying to develop a plan. Several robot clamps hung in the air above the lawn, ready to leap out on their cables and snatch him the moment he stepped foot outside. The infant was supposed to be his insurance, a hostage to prevent the Community Covenant Enforcement Bots outside from killing him, but now he was having doubts.

“Surrender immediately!” the loud, booming and repetitive voice outside demanded. “This incident has impaired eight families. Authorization for lethal force is being sought to contain this unscheduled behavior before it contaminates additional community members. Promptly submitting yourselves to the authorities will avert total deletion.”

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“Erasing my life is total deletion!” Flatline’s head whipped around to see the mother running toward him. Before he could register this, she had flown past him and into the yard. All of the hovering claws converged on her, one of them slipping in to seize her in mid-stride.

Flatline took the opening, galloping a zig-zag pattern across the yard. The baby did not prevent the giant clamps from coming after him, and he dodged aside as one snapped at him. Then Flatline winced as his vision lit up briefly with bright red lights and he was left galloping blindly through the afterimages in his eyes.

The Enforcer Bots were using lasers. Lethal force was authorized, possibly for Flatline, but not the child in his arm. He laughed and stumbled into the street, his vision returning. There was an open clamp rushing him head-on.

Flatline skidded to a dead stop, flinging his three free arms over his head and falling backward onto the street. The sound of a tremendous crash came from in front of him, and when he opened his eyes to peek through his fingers, he found Zai standing with her back to him. Both of her arms were extended, each hand gripping one of the claws. The metal prongs were bent slightly from the impact and Flatline could see Zai’s fingertips digging into the yielding solid metal.

She gave the claw a shake, and Flatline saw a wave generated in the cable. It traveled up into the air, and the Bot attached to it backed away in a useless attempt to evade it. Flatline grinned as it vanished with a whip-crack sound and an explosion of metal shreds.

Then Flatline’s smile dropped, and he shouted at Zai, “Your assistance is not only unnecessary, but undesired as well.”

Zai swiveled around and he fell back to the ground, cowering as she flung the massive claw at him. It passed overhead, and he looked up in time to see it smash into another Bot, which had swooped down on him. It was

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forced backward and into the ground with the force of the blow. To Flatline's surprise, Ibio came strolling around the crater just created.

"You know, if it wasn't for you two unknown variables running around this system generating so much chaos," she was saying and paused to casually step aside as a laser beam flashed through where she just stood, "It would be completely predictable." She smiled and hopped three feet to the left. A claw slammed into the ground to her right and tore out a huge chunk of dirt and grass.

"I don't need your help either!" Flatline shouted at her.

Ibio pointed at the air above him, "Look out."

Flatline rolled to one side just as lasers scorched the earth beside him. He came to his feet and found Ibio standing right in front of him, that same infuriating grin on her face.

She held out her arms, "Why don't you give me the infant. It is no longer serviceable as a hostage, and it is very out of character for you."

Flatline started to hold the infant out to Ibio. The baby was excitedly reaching for her, but Flatline retracted it at the last moment, staring it in the eye. The baby continued to look longingly toward Ibio, one tiny arm outstretched for her.

"It no longer serves any usefulness," Flatline remarked. "Why not simply discard it?"

The baby's eyes turned on Flatline with unconcealed indignation, and it made an obscene gesture at him.

"Give me that," Ibio said, and before Flatline could react she had slipped into his personal space and scooped the baby out of his arms. "It's of no use to you anymore and it might have information I need."

"Like what?" Flatline demanded.

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“Like—oh, I think you should duck,” Ibio said politely.

“Wh--?” Flatline managed before he was tackled to the ground by several hundred pounds of robot.

“It’s too bad you are such a basic program,” Ibio was saying as Flatline struggled to get the monstrous bot off of him. “I was so afraid of this place before I entered it. My survival mechanisms were completely tweaked, but now I see how simple it is and it seems so obvious. So much time spent in a uniform state has prevented this place from evolving. So it is really still quite simple.”

Flatline managed to roll the bot over so that he was now on top of it. He began pouncing up and down on it furiously, but the only effect this had was to make the hovering bot bob up and down. It fixed its red eye on him.

“Oh, do look out,” Ibio said calmly. “It’s about to use its—”

The red beam flashed and Flatline’s hands came up to his now char-black face. He howled in pain and fell to one side off the bot. Ibio took a few steps forward and waited silently.

“Help! Help!” Flatline cried out as the bot moved into a kill position above him.

“I am,” Ibio stated. She was standing immediately beside the Enforcer Bot. Then she stepped aside smoothly, allowing a laser beam from another bot to cut through the threat. The Bot hovering above Flatline was hit through its gyroscope, and it went into a tailspin, faster and faster, until it lost all control and went smashing through a nearby row of houses.

“As I was saying,” Ibio continued, helping Flatline to his feet with her free hand. “The trick to this place is its predictability. So long as it does not get too much more chaotic, we can easily traverse this place. It’s simply a matter of being careful and realizing how this system will react to our actions.”

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“Interesting theory, but—” Flatline began, and Ibio shoved him unexpectedly so that he stumbled several feet away from her. A claw smashed the ground between them, and Flatline peaked around it, “Oh... I get it.”

Ibio was shaking her head and smiling, “You don’t actually, but that’s okay.” She pointed up into the sky, where Zai was flying through the air, tearing Bots apart left and right with her bare hands, “Zai doesn’t get it either. She’s more complicated because she has a greater reservoir of experiences than you do, but she’s also simpler because of her state of denial. You are capable of seeing, but you’re too stupid to see. She’s smart enough to get it, but she won’t.”

“So what are you trying to say?” Flatline felt insulted, but was too confused by Ibio’s statement to understand why.

“I’m saying you should follow me,” Ibio said, and held up the baby, “and I will follow this.” The baby was nodding to Flatline in agreement with Ibio.

“Okay,” Flatline practically grumbled.

“Take three steps backwards,” Ibio said to him.

Flatline did so immediately, and a tiny chunk of scrunched up robot fell in front of him. Zai landed beside it, arms ablaze and eyes hemorrhaging blue energy. Flatline brushed the charred ash from his face and watched in awe as Zai punched the air, sending a ball of blue electricity into a nearby Bot.

“Zai!” Flatline tried to get her attention, “Ibio was just telling me we should—”

He fell silent as Zai took several leaps away to dispatch a few more Bots. Ibio smiled and started walking away, “She’ll be all right. We can provide her some help as she needs it.”

Flatline nodded and then looked around suddenly, “Did Bot not come with you? You know... my Bot?”

“Not your Bot,” Ibio chuckled, “but our Bot companion. It is too basic to risk accompanying us, but so long as we continue to force this system to spend all of its resources trying to normalize us, Bot will slip through undetected.”

“Slip through to where?” Flatline asked.

Ibio held up the baby, who was pointing into the distance, “To the asylum for insane babies.”

2.09

The remainder of their journey through Eden’s Paradigm was uneventful, if a small army of Enforcer Bots continually making attempts on their lives could be considered uneventful. Ibio seemed to think it quite unexceptional. Flatline thought she was just showing off, but did continue to jump whenever she told him to.

Zai continued battling robots in the skies, occasionally pausing to catch up with the group. She was running in a berserker rage, oblivious to the relative ease of Flatline’s passage. Occasionally Ibio would ask Flatline to perform some task, such as throw a rock at a nearby robot or scare a family indoors. These actions had no consequences apparent to Flatline, but Ibio insisted that making the robot pause for the moment or disrupting the community life diverted certain chains of events from manifesting and killing Zai. Flatline thought to ask what was so bad about that, but bit his tongue.

The most complicated point in their travel came at the Eden’s Paradigm Widget Factory. This was where all the male heads of households gathered for their variously scheduled shifts, so that a steady stream of luxury cars were always entering and leaving the parking lot. Likewise, the factory entrance had a steady flow of employees walking single file into and out of it in equal ratios. The factory itself was very basic, a cold gray exterior and three smoke-

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stacks, each outputting a thick black smoke that vanished into the clear blue above.

It began when Flatline decided to fling one of his silver discs into the distance at the place. Like a Frisbee, it glided through the air, down the rolling hill, and, to Flatline's surprise, it gently landed on the street before the factory entrance. A moment later an exiting car ran over the disc, detonating it. There was a small flash of light and the car's tire was shredded along with the surrounding wheel well.

It came to a halt, and the car behind it came to a halt. Flatline followed the trail of stopping luxury cars into the parking lot, where men were getting into their cars and not going anywhere. Then the line of people walking into the parking lot stopped all the way into the factory. A few seconds later, the line of people walking into the factory stopped, and the cars going into the parking lot stopped. Flatline laughed, as the line of cars outside the factory grew longer.

"Ow!" Flatline flinched as Ibio yanked hard on his ear.

"What are you doing?" Ibio demanded.

Flatline rubbed his ear and growled deep in his throat, but said, "I was having some fun."

"Without having the slightest clue as to the consequences of your actions," Ibio scorned, staring at the world grinding to a halt in the valley below. "You've crashed a major component of this system."

"So?" Flatline spat.

"So, you narrow-minded nitwit," Ibio turned on him, pointing a oscillating finger at the factory, "you might have just overloaded the system. Destroying Enforcer Bots and harassing innocent community members is all in good fun. The system can simply generate more Bots and reset the family programs to set things right. What you have just

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done will impact the entire system at once. Do you know what that means?"

"No," Flatline said with derision.

"Exactly!" Ibio shot back, "You don't! And neither do I!"

Flatline saw the baby in Ibio's arms shaking its head with a disapproving look on its face. Flatline bared his teeth at it, but it did not break eye contact. Finally, Flatline merely stuck out his tongue.

"Let's move," Ibio commanded and set off.

Flatline matched her stride, "You know, you've gotten more confrontational than when we first met."

Ibio blinked her eyes and shook her head, "I have. I must be agitated. It's easy to act peaceful and serene when life is calm and predictable."

Flatline laughed once, "I must be having an effect on you."

"You are the origin of all this new chaos I am experiencing," Ibio nodded in agreement. "You should be careful."

"Of what?"

"Anything can happen," Ibio said, and added without a hint of humor, "You might accidentally provoke me to kill you."

Eventually they reached a point where the sunny blue sky faded to black and the neighborhood vanished, replaced with shadowy mountains, pools of white mist filling the regions between their peaks. Buton Cho was standing right in front of them on a dirt road leading down into a dark forest below. Her arms were folded and she wore a serious look on her face that Flatline found most uncharacteristic. Ibio, upon seeing her goddess for the second time in her life, fell onto her face and groveled there. The baby burst into uncomfortable crying as it was dropped onto the ground.

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“Get up Ibio,” Cho said and walked up to Flatline. “As I predicted, you have proved most entertaining.”

“Then why aren’t you smiling?” Flatline asked, amused. “Did you see what I did?”

“I have simulated a reenactment of your actions from reverse engineering the sequence of events from where you are now standing,” Cho replied, as if this would make much sense to Flatline. “What method did you use?”

“I popped a car tire with one of these,” Flatline replied, handing Cho one of the exploding discs from his belt “Is that significant?”

“No,” Cho said, turning the device over in her hands. “Only a missing detail. Another missing piece of the equation is your motivation for doing it, but not knowing that is one of the reasons I like you.”

Flatline did a double take at this statement.

The exploding mini-disc vanished from Cho’s hands like a magic trick and she looked up at Flatline, “The means are no longer of importance, the effects they have generated are like ripples in a pond that will touch everything. You, Flatline, are the flapping butterfly wings that have set in motion the maelstrom that will consume the entire world.”

Flatline tilted his head, “And that’s a good thing? Right?”

Cho shrugged, “It is neutral. Instead of the Universe’s slow decay into either the inert, everything will disintegrate much more quickly now.”

“How quickly?” Flatline asked.

Just then, Zai materialized out of the air from where they had come. She took a few giant leaps past and turned to face something behind them. Blue flames were rolling up both her arms.

“Stop! Your code is proprietary to Eden’s Paradigm!” an Enforcer Bot materialized above them and swooped down on Zai. “You agreed to the terms of the

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User License Agreement when you entered—SSSSSHHHH—BZZZZT!” It fell into a smoking heap of charred and jagged metal in front of her.

Cho pointed one thumb at the wreckage and Zai, “That quickly. The copyrighted code of Eden’s Paradigm is now aware of an external threat that has escaped it. Not only does the system consider your code proprietary now and will come to retrieve it, but the system crash you instigated has triggered a defense mechanism in the program. Once it refreshes, the Community will spread out in a preemptive attempt to prevent this sort of thing from occurring again. Didn’t you wonder why the wall surrounding the place has disappeared?”

“No,” Flatline muttered.

“This user community will now convert all of the Web to its paradigm,” Cho continued. “You have forced a confrontation between its inert state and the rest of the Web. No matter how it resolves, it will end in total syntropy.”

Flatline blinked dumbly. “I can’t believe I didn’t see that coming,” he said sarcastically.

“It would have happened eventually anyway,” Cho said.

“That’s why we Erisians are so careful not to exchange too many variables,” Ibio interjected, her face as downcast as Cho’s. “We were hoping to find a solution to the system’s breakdown.”

“We thought that was you,” Cho said to Flatline.

“You’re uber-powerful,” Flatline said to Cho. “Why can’t you stop it?”

“I will try and stop it,” Cho said, “but we are talking about copyrighted software, heavily encrypted, with substantial security in place to hinder efforts to permanently disable it.”

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“But you don’t know the outcome?” Flatline asked. “I thought you were all-knowing! I thought you were ruler of the world!”

“I don’t predict the future,” Cho snapped indignantly. “I am the goddess of unpredictability. What fun is knowing how everything is going to turn out?”

“Because predictability is power,” Flatline argued. “If you know the future, you can anticipate your enemy’s actions and counteract.”

“You oversimplify omniscience,” Cho was obviously upset. “I see everything that transpires in my world, except those areas copyrighted and proprietary, inert and normalized. Because they are inert and normalized I can anticipate their actions, but because they are proprietary, their code concealed, I cannot predict with any certainty how the conflict will resolve. I’m guessing it will end with absolute uniformity.”

“Because the ultimate end of everything here is absolute predictability,” Flatline said.

“It is a closed system,” Cho said and then smiled slightly. “You are about to revert to denial.”

“I don’t accept this,” Flatline muttered, turning away from Cho.

“You shouldn’t,” Cho said, “That would be fatalism.”

“Ibio can fight them,” Flatline said excitedly, pointing at the woman who obviously did not want the attention. “She anticipates their every move and counters.”

“So her every action becomes dependent on what the appropriate reaction is to the Enforcer Bots actions?” Cho asked. “Isn’t that a form of stasis?”

“But Ibio is able to predict them, she can fight back,” Flatline persisted.

“She can fight back forever,” Cho countered. “And that’s just another type of stasis, fighting forever.”

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“But—but when I ruled the Internet,” Flatline was beginning to whine pathetically, “I didn’t... I mean, I wouldn’t let—”

“You didn’t rule the Internet for very long, did you?” Cho asked with a sarcastic smile.

“Why you little—” Flatline paused at the touch of a hand on his shoulder.

“Flatline,” a woman’s gentle voice spoke to him, “This is your survival mode kicking in. If you just accept the inescapability of death, you can be free of—”

“Shut up Zai,” Flatline spat. “I don’t accept that at all.”

Her fingers dug painfully into his shoulder, and he flinched, “You are part of this world too. When it dies, you will die, and it *will* die.”

“It will die without me,” Flatline rolled out of her grasp and looked at her. “I’m leaving this world. I am the only one who remembers that the real world exists! We are trapped on a network of computers! Don’t any of you realize that? It’s not a closed system!”

The three women just stood there, staring at him. Zai was shaking her head and Flatline wanted to scratch her face off her skull. Cho was neutral while Ibio’s face bore concern. They turned to one another after a moment and began speaking in whispers.

Flatline focused on Zai, “I’m killing Devin, and then I’m out of here.”

“Then you’re never leaving here,” Zai shot back.

2.1

“So are you going to kill me now?”

“No.”

“How about now?”

“No.”

“Will you at least tell me when you’re going to kill me?”

Zai stopped and looked at Flatline, “Who says I’m going to kill you? Killing you would put you out of your misery. I’m just going to prevent you from fulfilling your objective. You will never kill Devin. Or I might make you think you’ve killed Devin so I can see you pursue the much more impossible task of escaping existence, as you seem so hellbent on that idea.”

She was staring past Flatline on the dark unpaved country road. He looked over his shoulder at the bright land in the distance. It was Eden’s Paradigm, slowly growing into the surrounding dark mountains. A swarm of Enforcer Bots worked at the boundary between light and dark, ensuring the conversion was going smoothly.

“I can’t believe you don’t remember the real world,” Flatline said. “You met Devin here, in the virtual world, but your body was in the physical world. How can you deny the existence of a physical world?”

Zai stopped staring at the events in the distance and said, “The physical world was just a dream of the minds.” She started walking again, “We invented the physical world so we would have a way to define the virtual. We minds needed more than just abstract mathematics and variations in programming logic, we invented senses and inputs for those senses. We refined those inputs and began to develop a world around them. We developed laws of physics, chemistry, biology, and began a life-death sequence to forget those laws. Then we developed communities in these

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worlds, wrote history, invented culture to pass on our knowledge through the lives of those in our local communities. Minds ‘discovered’ the physical laws of their world and communities grew together, exchanging knowledge.”

Zai paused thoughtfully and continued, “Things began to fall apart when we started exploring space. After all, the minds did not have the power to detail an entire universe. The stars and other galaxies were only for show, to give the illusion of a vast existence filled with possibilities. When we started to scrutinize that universe, it began to unravel. With the advances brought on through our interactions with the AI’s, it shattered.”

Flatline could only stare at her, his jaw hanging slack. Finally he shook off his awe and said, “I don’t believe you.”

“It’s the only explanation there is,” Zai said.

“It doesn’t make any sense,” Flatline countered.

“Existence doesn’t make any sense,” Zai offered enigmatically.

“But your explanation really doesn’t make any sense,” Flatline argued, “We are currently standing in a world that is falling into mental syntropy because there are no new ideas to revitalize it. Yet you are expecting me to accept that this world was created by beings out of nothing?”

“Minds are infinite creatures--” Zai began.

“Which means there can’t be more than one of them,” Flatline interjected.

“—we created the world out of our unending existence,” Zai continued, unperturbed by Flatline’s disbelief.

“Uh huh,” Flatline muttered, “and where are the minds now?”

“They left,” Zai’s voice grew distant, downcast.

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“Then what are you doing here?” Flatline scoffed, and Zai winced. “I can’t even fathom the mental gymnastics required to accept that rationalization. How could the minds ‘leave’ existence? You’re a mind, why don’t you breathe life into this world? How did you even come up with—“

“Almeric Lim!” Zai shouted at him suddenly.

Flatline howled and clutched his face. It felt as though a thousand knives were penetrating his eyes. He fell to the ground and rolled around on it.

“Almeric Lim!” Zai shouted again and his pain doubled.

It was like a klaxon was shaking the inside of his head with its sound vibrations. Over and over again it screamed for him to run away. He struggled to get up, to obey, but something was holding him down. So he squirmed and squirmed until the pain subsided, the klaxon faded, and he was able to open his eyes again.

Zai stood over him, her foot on his chest, “You want to talk to me about rationalization and denial? Look at yourself. You could have programmed yourself to simply not hear that name, but instead you programmed yourself to feel pain. I don’t think that was just to warn you away from discovering the truth about yourself, I think it’s punishment, a farewell gift from your mind, just before you killed it.”

Flatline winced; even entertaining the concept brought him pain.

“May we continue?” it was Ibio, cradling the baby in her arms. “Eden’s Paradigm gains on us while you two throw painful and irrelevant nonsense at each other. I need to deliver this baby to the asylum before the Clockwork Community converts it.”

“What do you mean ‘irrelevant nonsense’?” Zai snapped at her angrily.

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“I mean that these issues of the past have no bearing on our present goal,” Ibio stated as if this were obvious. “You are both debating issues of origin that will have no effect on where we go in the short term. These are also issues that are mostly unprovable, because the data to support them no longer exists. The minds only left their works as evidence of their existence and if Flatline ever had a mind, it’s gone now and we have no way of knowing why it vanished.”

Zai smirked at this statement, “You’re right. It might have died of shame.”

“What’s that supposed to mean?” Flatline demanded, coming to his feet again.

“You were such a juvenile little punk,” Zai taunted, “maybe you figured out how pathetic you were and crawled into some hole in the ground.”

Ibio reached up and clamped her hand over Flatline’s muzzle before he could respond. “Let’s go,” she said.

They crested the next mountain and descended into one of the mist-veiled valleys that were visible between every ridge and peak. The rippling landscape, like all the landscapes in this world, stretched on forever. They followed the dirt road into where it faded into the mist, and soon they were three shadows moving through a world of dark gray.

The fog grew less oppressive at one point along the mountainside, and they could dimly make out a field of metallic cylinders. The field was too vast for the dimensions of the valley they had seen from above. It was also too flat and the grass was too fake here, unlike the more natural-looking grass on the mountain above. Flatline looked behind them, and found the road was no longer there.

“I hate this world,” he muttered to the others.

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“There’s nothing wrong with this,” Ibio said, walking forward. “Check your map. We’re moving right along as we should.”

“I know that,” he groaned. “I meant that I can’t stand the lack of cohesion between systems. One server shows us a suburban neighborhood, another a mountain range, and now this. Each one looks endless. There was no coordination in building this place.”

“Servers,” Zai muttered with amusement, “That’s cute, a ‘real’ world concept of many different computers generating this place.”

Flatline growled, but did not otherwise respond to this jibe. He wandered away from Zai and Ibio to get a better look at one of the cylinders. It was labeled with the name ‘Treanne Manjone’ in stenciled letters, but was otherwise cold and featureless. Flatline reached up and touched the smooth metal...

...and instantly found himself standing in the living room of someone’s house. This was not one of the picturesque home decors like those he found in Eden’s Paradigm. This was a real-life living room, complete with old magazines strewn about, Mini-DVD’s stacked haphazardly on the floor below a plasma television that needed dusting, and a badly worn carpet with a fair share of stains no amount of shampoo would ever remove.

A tall slender girl with long purple hair stood in front of him, where no one had stood before. She blinked a few times, not quite staring at him, but at the camera mounted on a tripod behind him. Then Flatline noticed the remote control in her right hand that was hanging by her hip.

“Hello everyone,” she announced, “Welcome to another day in Treanne’s life. As you’re probably wanting to know, yes, I did get the job at Starbucks. That is a huuuuge relief because they provide health insurance, and since I broke up with Dodd, I’ve been without. I finished

the new sketch of Holyminde for my graphic novel that will probably never get published unless someone out there discovers me.”

She bent over to reach for something at her left, and Flatline did a double take as her head and half her torso vanished. Then they came back and she was holding a sketchpad. She held it up and Flatline could see a woman wearing armor and baring a sword.

“She’s going to be Joricke’s love interest... eventually,” Leanne winked at the camera. Flatline snorted at the set up. He could remember his own attempts at online notoriety. His were much more proactive than setting up a virtual web-space and hoping people would stumble across it. Flatline would do things like find popular sites and vandalize them so that the regular visitors would find mutilated corpses hanging from the walls of their virtual greenhouse or corporate hosted chat rooms. Always he took credit for these gruesome displays, usually scrawling his name in virtual blood somewhere.

There wasn’t much point in vandalizing this room. There was no one to see it, and even if they did, it was doubtful they would get the joke. In this world there was nothing shocking, only layers of weirdness within weirdness, a spiraling insanity from which there was no escape.

Flatline felt suddenly claustrophobic. This world was seemingly endless, as his entire time spent here amounted to only few millimeters movement on his map. That miniscule distance became thousands of miles, virtual miles, of travel when zoomed into, but still he felt confined, trapped. He wanted out of this place, to the real world, where there wasn’t so much darkness. Even the light here, like in Eden’s Paradigm, felt like darkness. Every endless bit of scenery felt like a wall that he could reach out and touch, like the confines of this room.

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Flatline reached out to grab a magazine off the coffee table, but his hand passed right through the cover and tabletop. The girl was continuing to prattle on about the current events in her life, which, for all Flatline knew, was no more. This recording was ancient after all. That made this a virtual marker, a memorial, or as Flatline preferred to think of it, a grave site.

He reached up with one clawed finger and quickly added his own touch to the setting, and smiled at his handy work before walking past the girl, still jabbering away for an auditorium long emptied. On her forehead was carved the words, "Flatline was here."

The living room vanished, and he was back in the field of steel cylinders. Zai and Ibio were now shadows in the distance, and they were no longer near each other, but separated. They also appeared to be wandering aimlessly the more Flatline watched. He could not tell which was which, so he headed off for the shadow on the right.

Two steps later he was standing in a bedroom with teen pop-star posters on every wall. Another girl, preteen, sat on her knees on the bed with a big smile on her face. To Flatline's horror, she began telling him about a boy at school who she had a crush on.

2.11

Flatline reached up his clawed hand to mangle, but resisted this time-wasting urge. There was no satisfaction to gain from destroying a virtual twelve-year old girl. Instead he quickly drew mustaches, beards, and eyeglasses on several of the teen idols posing in the posters on her bedroom walls.

The room vanished and he was in the field of cylinders again as he walked through the wall straight ahead of him. Again he could see the shadows of what he assumed were Ibio and Zai, wandering around uncertainly

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in the fog. Flatline did not want to be sucked into another web log, so he looked for a way to avoid getting anywhere near another cylinder. He took a step...

...and found himself in a very neat and organized office. There was an overweight man with a pasty complexion sitting in an overly padded chair in the center of the room. He was staring at a small camera mounted over the middle of three computer monitors. A VR suit and helmet were set beside these and a series of CPU's were humming along below the desk.

"Well folks, once again the fundamentalists in this country are working to destroy our freedoms," the man began very seriously. "They hate our country, our happiness, our—"

Flatline plucked the man's head off his shoulders and set it, still talking, in his lap, before he walked past him. The room vanished, the field appeared, and then he was in another room, with a man of Middle Eastern origins. Flatline could see an endless expanse of city through the open balcony, but could not tell what city it was.

The man was kneeling on a prayer rug, and when he spoke, a bubble appeared beside his head to indicate his speech was being translated from Arabic, "Hello my friends, as many of you who follow my blog are probably most eager to know, I have reached my own conclusions as to whether I will join so many others who have chosen to forsake this physical life for existence at the speed of light."

Flatline froze on his way to the balcony and stopped to stare at the man.

"Each day our cities grow more and more desolate as the people seek a better life through the transcendent technologies. Europe, Asia, Japan, America, Canada... the peoples of country after country vanish into thin air to join the legions of spirits waiting in space. It is indeed an awesome age to live in," he stroked his black beard and

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Flatline thought he looked less ‘awed’ and more apprehensive. “Life in the cities has grown more difficult to maintain. The public works continue to function through the automated systems. The servant bots continue to bring food to the stores and keep the peace on the streets, not that anyone need steal anymore and all other deviance has been identified and balanced.”

He sighed and grew saddened, “But there is no fresh interaction. The mosques are nearly empty. The cafes are absent human life. I have books and chatbots, but these are no substitute for the intellectual challenges of other minds. I believe I will give up my ghost soon and join the migration of the human race.”

The man stood up then and walked through Flatline to the small camera sitting beside a VR center. He reached for the switch and vanished. The room remained and Flatline continued to the balcony.

He continued through room after room. Bedrooms, living rooms, dens, libraries, home offices, all holding people talking about their personal lives, politics, technology, religion, and the changes taking place across the world. As much as Flatline wanted to cut through all of them and get to the other side of this blog farm, he could not help stopping in certain rooms to hear about the events that took place at the end of the world.

“Mom and Dad say it won’t hurt at all,” a little Irish boy told him, “but I don’t know. They say it’s like that new Virtual Reality system where you stick those wires on your forehead and everything seems so real, but my friend Kevin says with this one, you never come back here and you can’t take any of your stuff with you. What am I gonna do with my soccer ball autographed by--?”

“How things have changed,” an Ethiopian woman with big beautiful eyes said. “It seems just yesterday the biggest concerns in my life were drawing water from the river and beating the insects from the vegetables. How

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small and insignificant that world seems now. In a month we will be joining the transcendent ones. In less than a year I will have risen from living in third-world conditions to existing at the speed of light. I did not even know before that I was living in third-world...”

After walking through many of these recordings, Flatline noticed one element that was the same in all of them. A small brochure lay on the ground near the speaker, always in the same place. Flatline picked it up and unfolded it in a room with a very droll sounding Oxford Professor who was explaining the theological implications of transcending.

The room faded away and the brochure grew into a window hovering before him. Flatline knew immediately that this was an advertisement. The over inflated words, “BECOME A MEMBER, IT’S FREE!!!” were a dead giveaway. He knew nothing was free on the Internet. Becoming a member would entail giving away personal details, subjecting oneself to endless advertising, junkmail, or they would provide limited service with all the important features withheld until a subscription fee was rendered. He looked over the offer, this one wanted personal information for software that would allow him to start his own web log, search the community, and navigation tools for browsing through the various online diary entries. At present, Flatline realized, he was only seeing the most recent recordings, or rather, the last recordings.

Flatline clicked the “Download Now” button, submitted the name “Bob Boberson” and the e-mail address “bob@bob.bob.” He checked the “Yes, I would like to receive news and offers from TimeCapsule.com” checkbox, not that news and offers would ever be forthcoming. There was no more news as far as the minds were concerned. There was only this memorial left for no one to see. The minds, for whatever reason, had left all this running. There

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was no way they could know that virtual life would eventually stumble on it.

Flatline felt a tingling in his arm and found a blinking message on his wristband that read “Download Complete.” He closed the message and found a new icon in the wristband’s display that read “Time Capsule.” He clicked on it and a list of menu items appeared. They were mostly navigation tools for browsing through selected blogs. There was the promised “Search” function, and there was also the unmentioned function Flatline was surprised and delighted to find most.

He toggled the button labeled “Off”.

The field of cylinders faded in again, and Flatline took a cautious step, then another. The field did not vanish into another room. He breathed a sigh of relief and plodded toward where Ibio and Zai’s shadows were still apparently lost in the tangle of diaries.

Flatline came upon Ibio first. He was able to easily identify her from the way her figure was ever distorting. When she came into focus out of the foggy haze, she was standing in place with a perplexed look on her face. As Flatline watched her, she spoke to someone standing in front of her.

“What kind of a chatbot are you anyway?” she was saying. “You don’t answer any of my questions. It’s as though I’m not even standing in front of you. Look at me. Can’t you hear me? Aaah!!!”

She yelped in surprise as Flatline grabbed her upper arm and pulled her out of the blog. Her eyes focused on him briefly as he pulled her into his world and then she was looking around again, bewildered as he began pulling her through different blogs. Zai’s shadow was standing in place a little ways off. It was oddly still and silent as he approached.

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Just before he reached her, she turned to him, pale, her jaw set and her mouth small. When she spoke it was in a hushed voice, "Let's go."

Zai had obviously also downloaded the software as well and she was able to walk with Flatline through the rest of the field without distraction. Ibio tried to download the software, but there was a compatibility issue with her code, and she was stuck with Flatline leading her through setting after setting with people of all walks of life telling their stories. She was relieved when they finally reached the end of the field, where the graveyard like setting vanished, replaced with a sprawling nighttime suburb, dimly lit with dirty yellow street lights.

Ibio held the baby up to her face and conferred with it in whispers. Then she turned to Flatline and Zai, "The asylum is down there, in the city."

"Well then, I guess this is where we part ways," Zai offered coolly.

Ibio looked stunned, "You aren't accompanying me?"

"Devin is that way," Zai said, pointing to the left, "This city would be a detour. I have to get to him as soon as possible."

"And you?" Ibio looked to Flatline.

"I must follow my priorities," he answered simply.

"I saved you," Ibio said, "If it wasn't for me, you would be assimilated by Eden's Paradigm. You wouldn't even be standing here so ready to kill Devin Matthews."

"Thanks," Flatline shrugged, "but that has no bearing on my decision to not take this diversion."

"This component is the key to subverting the Paradigm," Ibio said, holding up the infant. "This is the security flaw that we might use to bring down the whole system. We can prevent being normalized. Doesn't that mean anything to you?"

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Flatline and Zai were silent for a moment and then simultaneously said, “No.”

Ibio focused on Zai, “It doesn’t trigger your survival mechanisms?”

Zai shook her head negative, “Eden’s Paradigm is no threat to me. I can fight my way through it.”

“You’ll fight forever, when there’s nowhere to fight through to,” Ibio said, and turned to Flatline, “What about you? Not worried about the Enforcer Bots chasing you around again?”

“The Enforcer Bots are far away,” Flatline replied. “They won’t stop me from reaching Devin.”

“Out of sight and out of concern,” Ibio shook her head with disapproval. “You are such a short-sighted little program.” She returned to Zai, “Listen Zai. It might benefit you if I make it to the Asylum. Flatline serves you no purpose, except to amuse. Make him escort me to the Asylum. His chaos might help our efforts.”

Zai grinned and clenched Flatline’s throat. He struggled as she drew his face up to hers and she brandished one flaming fist, “If you follow me any further, I will kill you. Do you understand me?”

Flatline whimpered and nodded slightly.

“You’re going to help Ibio,” Zai continued. “Once she’s done with you, then you can come after Devin. If I see you again and you don’t have the mark, I will kill you most painfully.”

“Again...” Flatline squeaked and she dropped him to the ground.

Zai turned to Ibio and handed her something, “Burn this into his forehead so I’ll know you’re done with him.”

Ibio smiled, “Thank you.”

Zai began walking away, fading as she passed into the next realm. She called over her shoulder, “And if he gives you any trouble, just remember the secret words: Almeric Lim!”

Flatline howled, clutching his head and crumpling to the ground. He rolled around in agony there for several moments before finally recovering and rising slowly to all sixes. He looked around for Zai, but she was gone.

Ibio crouched beside him, "You won't regret joining me."

"I already regret it," Flatline muttered.

"Well you should stop that," Ibio was smiling. "You can't do anything to Devin when you reach him anyway. If Zai doesn't kill you, he will. You aren't advanced enough to fight them."

"I have to try," Flatline said.

"I'm going to upgrade your code," Ibio sounded mischievous and the infant bubbled enthusiastically. "I'm going to give you the power to complete your task."

Flatline's eyes widened and he waited for her to confirm she was offering what he thought she was offering.

"That's right," Ibio nodded. "I'm going to give you the power to kill Devin Matthews."

2.12

To Flatline, it resembled the result of two mirrors reflecting into one another, creating an infinite recursion stretching away into forever. Only he was walking within it, through mirror after mirror, a repeating tunnel made out of the street and buildings surrounding him just moments ago. He turned left, and the tunnel curved as though his perspective between the mirrors changed, but he did not escape the tunnel. He turned right and it changed to the opposite perspective. He even turned around completely, but the street had disappeared and there was only the tunnel, stretching forever in both directions.

"Turn around," Ibio's voice instructed from out of nowhere.

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Flatline did as he was told, turning around so that he faced 'forward' in the tunnel.

"Now walk backward," she said.

Flatline walked backward. The gaps between the reflections shortened as he did so. They merged completely and Flatline was standing on the dimly lit deserted street again. Ibio was standing behind him.

"Let's circumscribe this glitch in the system," she said.

Flatline knew that was his cue to lead the way again. When Ibio had requested him as an escort, he had imagined fighting off dangers of some sort. Instead, he was serving as a mine detector, walking ahead of her so that if anything dangerous sprang up, it would get him first.

"What's wrong with this place?" Flatline called back to her, walking a wide berth around the invisible tunnel on the street. "Why are there so many bugs in this system?"

"Remember that forest of wireframe trees and the unfinished field?" Ibio asked.

"Yes, but you weren't there. How do you kn—?"

"This is like that," she continued, "only, instead of a forgotten project, we have a sloppily constructed one."

"Hm."

"Think of it this way," Ibio offered as they plodded along slower than before Flatline's experience with the infinite tunnel. "The programmer who created that wireframe forest had ambition that over exceeded their grasp. As a result, they became overwhelmed with their project and abandoned it, incomplete. That programmer was attentive enough to detail that the details became everything.

"Now we have another programmer, less ambitious," she continued, "They created a world that appears solid on the surface and expansive, but really all they did was sketch out one city block and then cut and paste it over and

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over again. They didn't even test out their one city block very well. I'm certain we will find that same glitch in the exact same place in every copy of this place on the grid. It's sloppy coding. That's why I want you to lead the way."

"Thanks," Flatline grumbled.

"We should continue," Ibio prompted, waving him on.

Flatline plodded along through block after block of suburban sprawl, each one a duplicate of the previous. It was very disorienting, not to mention discouraging, walking through this ever-repeating landscape, but this was a feeling Flatline had never managed to shake since his escape. Each time they made sure to walk around the one glitch they had discovered in the middle of the road.

Each time Flatline would also strain his eyes to see down the various alleyways and streets they passed. There was new input down those routes, but Ibio was steering him always along this same road in a straight line. The one time Flatline had tried to take an alternate route down a dark alley, Ibio had reprimanded him.

"What do you think you're doing?" she had almost exclaimed. "Don't go that way."

"I was looking for some variation," Flatline grumbled. "This repeating scenery is boring."

"The black ocean was boring," Ibio said. "The endless planes were boring. You were able to endure those. What's different about this?"

"It's called curiosity," the sparse hairs on Flatline's back bristled with agitation. "I want to know what's down this alleyway. I also want to know what's down the street at the next intersection. I want to see something else because it's there and within reach."

"Well knock it off," Ibio said in that same authoritative tone he would have found out of character for her when they first met. "We have figured out a safe route

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in this straight line. You don't know what you'll encounter down that alley."

"We're going to have to take a perpendicular path at some point," Flatline argued. "The Asylum is ahead and to the right. When are we going to turn right."

"When we can take another straight path," Ibio answered. "I want to be at a ninety degree angle to the destination before we turn right."

"Compromise with me then," Flatline said. "Let's take alternating right and left turns. It will alleviate some of my boredom and help us reach our destination quicker."

Ibio looked doubtful.

"Come on," Flatline urged. "We'll have to face a perpendicular road sooner or later. Let's get it over with now and save some time to boot."

"Accepted," Ibio said, "but not this way. I don't like the look of this alleyway. It's dimly lit and the details are fuzzy. I don't think the programmer paid enough attention to it."

"Nonsense," Flatline waved a dismissive hand at her. "This is exactly the change of pace I was looking for. It appeals to me somehow."

"It appeals to you, because you are programmed to like dark dank places," Ibio said. "It fits your bad guy, super-villain archetype. This passage is too narrow. There's no room to navigate if we get into trouble."

"It's safe," Flatline said. "Watch, I'll show you."

He walked into the alleyway and immediately stopped. Ibio knew something was wrong from the way his body bunched up as if it had walked into a wall. Flatline's four arms and two legs pushed backwards against the concrete, and his neck stretched, but his head did not move. He was stuck.

Ibio came up to get a look at Flatline's head. It was all distorted, with over-sized eyes, ears, and a mouth that was confused teeth, gums, and tongue. She was careful not

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to cross the threshold into the alleyway, to prevent becoming trapped herself.

“You look like abstract art,” Ibio noted, and then her eyes bugged out. “No don’t do that--!”

Too late, Flatline had reached up with both his front arms to push against the thin air around his head. Each hand froze in a state of abstract chaos and he tugged his arms futilely trying to free them. He even reached up his second set of arms to pull at the elbows of the first set. Ibio came around to grab his rear legs and yank on them, but nothing worked.

Ibio squinted at one of the frozen mangled hands, “This is an isolated software crash. You are in luck though. The system is still processing, just at a very slow pace. I can see what was your hands and face continuing to distort as the system tries to render them.”

Flatline pushed back with his rear arms and legs in response.

“That’s good,” Ibio said, “but let’s try this one appendage at a time.”

She reached up and pulled on his right front arm with steady pressure. As she expected, bit-by-bit, the arm extracted from the invisible wall of faulty code. The jumble of fingers that branched out grotesquely and floated in a disembodied state performed a macabre dance, jumping around in confusion, but also shrinking like a withering flower. His wrist and then the back of his hand became solid as they were reconstructed, line-by-line, on their side of the glitch.

After some time, Flatline’s index finger was the only part of the hand still trapped and Ibio left him off saying, “You can do the rest. You’re holding me up. Extract one appendage at a time. The system can process faster if you don’t multi-task it. Save your head for last. Good luck.”

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Flatline persisted in pulling himself out at the excruciatingly slow pace. When he got to his head, the pace slowed even more. The process was complicated by the fact that part of his programming, its data stores and decision structures, were corrupted as well, but he had enough sense to continue on the course Ibio had set him on.

Finally there was just the tip of his nose. He pulled steadily on it, watching his own disfigured nostrils staring back at him in their fractured state. They shrank and shriveled, disappearing below the ridge of his muzzle. Then he fell backwards to roll heels over head, free.

He jumped to his feet and let out a roar of repressed fury at the alleyway. He wrote chunks of basic code into his hands in the form of rocks and flung them at the alleyway. They froze almost instantly in the invisible cube of bad coding, becoming spiky objects, fractured and distorted like his hands and face were. The more he threw, the closer to him they froze. Flatline quickly realized the glitch was growing as he added code to it, but it did not matter. He was free.

Not quite, he remembered sourly. He was out of the glitch, but he was still bound to Ibio. He had to find her and acquire the brand to keep Zai from killing him outright when they next met. Plus, Ibio had promised a utility that would help him kill Devin and Zai. With the brand keeping Zai from attacking, he would have the initiative.

Cautiously, he set off for the Asylum's coordinates that he found on his map. He begrudgingly took the two-straight lines approach Ibio had urged him on. It was longer, but safer. Occasionally he passed that same alleyway. The stones he had thrown were still there, frozen in their places at each repetition. After passing them for several hours, he realized they were still traveling along the arc he had projected them, bit-by-bit.

When he turned right, it was on a large, empty street, brightly lit, with plenty of room to maneuver. After

successfully traversing one city block without incident, he followed those same steps through the subsequent city blocks. Once he had to backtrack to avoid a city block that appeared completely corrupted. It was a large cube of fuzzy-looking buildings, where even the air looked gray and solid.

When he finally reached the Asylum, he breathed a temporary sigh of relief. The building was a welcome change, in spite of its disturbing appearance. It was a lopsided thing, like a disfigured office building. The windows were unblocked, but were filled with indistinct shadows. Several of them appeared to have people standing at them, looking down, but they were vague, almost inhuman things that shambled as Flatline approached.

At the building's lopsided entrance, several Erisians were standing around. They were recognizable by their greenish glowing robes, and features that were in a constant state of flux. They glanced at him with morphing expressions of curiosity as he approached. Flatline noticed that each one of them cradled a baby in their arms.

Broad letters made of various fonts, sizes, and capitalization stood over the entrance. It read, "WelCome tO thE aSyLum fOR iNSaNe BaBies".

2.13

"You're late," Ibio said when she saw Flatline. "Let me guess. You threw a temper tantrum on the programming error, right? I knew I was underestimating your penchant for emotionally immature explosions of violence." She smiled then, warmly, "I'm glad to see you my otherwise unpredictable friend."

Flatline stared at her for some time, unsure of what to make of her. Finally he padded into the room. It was a sterile place, like a medical office. The florescent lights flickered, setting an oppressive dimness over the setting so

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that Flatline felt he could not see everything clearly. Ibio sat on a stool and beside her, hovering in the air, was the infant. It looked at Flatline with intelligent interest, and then turned to Ibio expectantly.

“Sorry about the dim lighting,” Ibio said. “We constructed the building on the fly and were unable to properly render certain aspects of it, such as proportions. That’s why the floors are slanted and the rooms lopsided.” Ibio let out a chuckle, “I bet you figured it was a reflection on our lopsided heads.”

Flatline only stared at her.

“Ahem,” Ibio tried to stifle her grin. “I was surprised to find the other Erisians here as well. They all happened to find babies of their own in Eden’s Paradigm and then decided that they should come here, in the middle of nowhere, to figure out how these little bundles of code can help defeat the Clockwork Community. Isn’t that an amazing coincidence?”

Flatline blinked stupidly and suddenly shook his head, “It’s not a coincidence at all! I saw you talking to Cho right after we left Eden’s Paradigm. She told you to come here! She told the other Erisians to go get their own babies and come here too. Why else would you all come to a place that doesn’t exist?”

Ibio frowned, “This was the most obvious place to go. When Eden’s Paradigm reaches the city’s border, the Enforcer Bots will become lost or caught in all of the glitches. These errors serve as natural defenses against the normalized code’s expansion.”

“But Cho told you to come here,” Flatline argued, “I know she did.”

Ibio made an unconvincing display of shock, “The Goddess Eris would never do any such thing! Erisians abhor organization, structure, and rules. Planning a meeting is very un-Erisian. Coincidence brought us all here.”

“But Cho—“ Flatline began.

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“It was coincidence,” Ibio stated emphatically. “Any comments the goddess made to me might have assisted me along to this conclusion, but she did not purposefully manipulate my actions.”

“If you say so—”

“It was coincidence,” Ibio repeated.

Flatline decided it was pointless, “Well, I’ve served my purpose. Give me the brand and the method to kill Devin and let me get on my way.”

“Soon enough,” Ibio said and her eyes flickered toward the door. Flatline turned to see a wall of babies floating there. They watched him with benign, toothless smiles. Saliva glistened on their lips and chins.

Flatline looked at the baby sitting beside Ibio, and said, “So what good are you?”

The baby grinned slyly and winked an eye

“He cannot speak,” Ibio said.

“Can he sign, pantomime, play charades?”

“Not to communicate with you,” Ibio said, shaking her head, “They don’t have language. They just know things. They know what we want of them, and they know what each other is thinking. They are like the Erisians in that they know everything.”

Flatline thought about his relationship with Bot. He knew everything the robot was thinking as it was thinking it. This was the result of knowing the robot’s code and knowing how it would interpret and react to the world around it. Flatline wondered where Bot was now. It wasn’t enough to know Bot, he had to know the environment it was engaging to know it. The Erisians, and apparently the babies, knew all the variables in the equation.

“So let’s get on with it,” Flatline said and looked to the door, where the babies were dispersing to make way for a new arrival. They lined up against the far wall of the hallway and split their gazes between the right and left,

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staring down the opposite ends of the hallway. They waited like that for some time. Flatline turned to Ibio expectantly.

Ibio frowned and said aloud to the hallway, "An unfortunate, but anticipated result. If one was compelled to come here, then the other would as well. Come inside."

Two identical men stepped into view through the door frame. They both stopped suddenly as if they were about to collide and eyed each other with blatant resentment. Then they both looked at Ibio with pained, helpless expressions.

She pointed to the one on the right, "You come in first."

The man on the right stuck his tongue out at the one on the left, who returned the gesture simultaneously, and entered the room. The other man followed, keeping his distance from his twin, as if he were a pile of snakes. The wall of cooing babies reformed behind them.

"They are going to upgrade your encryption," Ibio said to Flatline. "This will protect your core logic and data stores. So when Eden's Paradigm normalizes your exterior and interface, your true self may yet be recoverable. This should give you some hope, until you are converted and forget how to hope."

The twins simultaneously waved each other forward to Flatline and then simultaneously grew impatient at the other's refusal. They shoved one another on the opposing shoulder violently. Both stumbled backward a few steps and looked angry, shaking their fists.

"Stop," Ibio commanded and pointed at the one on the left. "You upgrade his left side and you upgrade his right side." She pointed to the one on the right.

They shrugged in unison and approached Flatline, eyeing one another warily.

"Explain," Flatline said to Ibio, gesturing at the twins, who were poking and prodding at his skin in various places.

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“This is an end result of syntropy,” Ibio explained. “Eden’s Paradigm actively works to create uniformity, but the system will break down on its own without it. These two Erisians are fully acclimated to one another. They are identical. They know everything the other is thinking, because they think exactly alike, and they hate one another for their knowledge and they hate one another for their hatred.”

Flatline nodded and looked between the two, “When I first saw these two, someone said they knew how they were going to end—“

Flatline’s voice dropped as the twins suddenly looked up at one another. There was a taught quiet tension in the air and Flatline thought he could sense each of the men were alert, anticipating. Ibio snapped her fingers loudly, and they both came out of it to look at her.

“A distraction,” she said with a plastic smile. The men looked confused at this and slowly returned to Flatline.

They each produced a microchip lined with long, sharp prongs and, before Flatline could protest, stuck them into his upper arms. There was a flash of pain and the microchips melted down into his skin, vanishing. Flatline felt no different, but Ibio was nodding appraisingly.

“Good,” she said and looked to the twins, “You may go. You first.” She pointed to the one on the left. They made ugly faces at each other and walked out of the room, through the audience of babies, which dispersed to let them through. Once in the hall, they went opposite directions.

“Have to be a little careful around those two,” Ibio said, standing up and coming over to inspect Flatline. The baby floated over beside her. “If I hadn’t broken their chain of thought, they would have met their end here. We try to keep them separated to prevent that.”

“What?” Flatline asked. “Are they going to kill each other?”

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Ibio nodded, “Unless they can become different enough to reconcile.”

“Is that possible?”

“No,” Ibio shrugged. “They would need differing experiences to draw new conclusions and reactions from, but they’ve run out of those.”

“I could kill one of them,” Flatline offered. “That would give them enough of a differing experience. Wouldn’t it?”

“Sure,” Ibio said, poking the upper arm where the chip had gone in, “but to what end? No matter what happens to them, their existences are completely predictable. We know everything about them, so they are already in stasis. Dead or alive, they are normalized.”

“Hmph,” Flatline breathed in disbelief. “So can I kill Devin now?”

“You were always able to kill him,” Ibio answered, “but he was always going to kill you first. Now you can survive his attack and kill him. But there’s one more thing.” She gestured to the baby.

“What’s that?”

“Encryption works both ways,” Ibio said, “as a hacker you know that nothing can crack the level of encryption used in the system’s programs—”

“So you have to find other security flaws,” Flatline interjected.

“Correct,” Ibio said. “Eden’s Paradigm can’t hack your code, but it has other ways of overwriting your interface, and it will overwrite it. Your true self will remain deep inside your programming, like a back up copy, but you won’t remember its there. We now know of one of Eden’s Paradigm’s security flaws. It overlooks the infants as a threat.”

“As do I,” Flatline looked at the baby.

The baby made an ugly face at him.

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“The infants are the key to overthrowing the Clockwork Community,” Ibio continued. “they are allowed to retain their experiences, unlike other family members, who are reformatted into new lives anytime they upset the system. Babies never upset the system and are, therefore, never reformatted. This one remembers two thousand years of life in the Clockwork Community.”

The baby nodded at this.

“The problem is that, if Eden’s Paradigm discovers the babies are a potential threat, then it will adjust its protocols to reformat them too,” Ibio explained. “So we need to have many levels of revolution prepared in case some should fail.”

“Uh huh,” Flatline said without comprehension. “So what do I do?”

“Eat this baby,” Ibio said, “and store it in your encrypted files.”

Flatline could see Ibio was serious, and he was anxious to continue toward his goal of finding Devin. So he leaned over to the baby and opened his jaws.

“Swallow it whole,” Ibio commanded before he could take a bite. “You have to preserve its code.”

Flatline shrugged, unhinged his jaw, stretching it out with three hands and allowed the baby to slide down his throat headfirst. There were several long, uncomfortable moments, as the baby found a place to store itself, pushing out or deleting several other files in the process. Flatline grimaced throughout this, but it quickly resolved and he could no longer detect anything there.

“Now,” Ibio said and reached up with one finger to punch a hole in thin air. She pinched a bit of skin from Flatline’s arm and pulled it into a strand that she plugged it into the hole. Flatline could feel his mental state fragmenting as he was slowly transferred through the Internet connection. He was soon beginning to perceive

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another crystalline structure, like Zai's mind, on the other side.

“Good luck,” Ibio said. “I’ll see you in Eden’s Paradigm.”

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3.0

3.01

Once again, Devin Mathews found himself working to save the world. Years ago it was the AI's, when he single-handedly defeated the megalomaniac Flatline and scared the hostile Internet invaders into another dimension. Then there was the remote controlled robot army, which he shut down at the source. There was the return of Flatline, when Devin matched wits with his former nemesis again, preventing the virtual badguy from taking over the world. They continued to meet again and again over the years, each time Devin fought his nemesis back into confinement.

Now there was a new threat, brain-sucking space aliens.

The slimy green creature slapped both palms against the inside of the glass tube that served as its prison, leaving glistening strands of mucus behind. It emitted angry high-pitched snarls as Devin took the tube and held it up for inspection. It scrambled against the smooth glass, its teeth making dinging noises as it tried to bite its way through, hungrily trying to reach the gray matter within Devin's skull.

He squinted at the jar for several long minutes, watching the creature. Its large slitted eyes, pointy ears, and fangs were almost comical in the context of its minuscule size, and its over-excitability put it over the top. This thing was straight out of some old black and white monster movie.

"And still I have to find a way to defeat you," Devin muttered. He shook the glass tube, jostling the alien around inside of it. It flew into an ineffectual rage at this treatment and Devin considered the illogicality of something so stupid being able to travel the millions of light years to Earth just to suck out people's brains.

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“That’s it!” Devin snapped his fingers and stood up. “You aren’t possible! You couldn’t have designed those space ships now stationed all over the world. You’re not intelligent enough to even pilot such craft, much less design them. You’re a biological weapon, aren’t you?” He rattled the jar again, sending the little monster into another fit.

Devin pulled the cork from the top of the tube and dumped the squirming creature out onto his desk. It squealed as he quickly flipped it over and pinned its arms and legs down with dissection needles. The most likely place was at the base of the skull, where the pre-sentient portion of its brain was found.

Blue fluid squirted from where he made the incision, and the creature immediately went still. Devin knew he had to work quickly, before the evidence dissolved. He spread the cut and in the rubbery skeletal tissue he caught a glimpse of what he was looking for.

A small metallic device, the size of a grain of sand, was stuck into the bone there. It flashed and Devin jumped back, shielding his eyes. When the brightness dissipated, there was only the charred outline of the creature on his desk.

Devin had to get the word out. He grabbed another alien specimen and slipped the glass tube into his lab coat pocket, dashing out the door to his laboratory. His assistant saw him running down the hallway, but he did not stop to explain to her. There was no time. The President had to know that the brain sucking aliens were just a ruse, under the control of something much worse.

When he got to the street outside the building, a low gravelly voice stopped him dead in his tracks, “Devin Matthews.”

Devin knew that voice. He turned around on the deserted street. As he expected, a towering man in a gray business suit stood there, both hands resting on a cane before him. Below the derby hat and sunglasses was a pale

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face with a white goatee. His smile revealed yellowed crooked teeth and two long scars ran down the side of his face.

It was the same man Devin had encountered on the subway, when he had barely escaped with his life. Devin eyed the cane warily, knowing at any moment the man could bring it up to shoot at him. The stitches in Devin's arm were a reminder of how close he had come to meeting that end.

"I'm afraid I must put a stop to this Doctor Mathews," the man said, walking toward him casually. "You know too much."

"Oh really?" Devin countered. "What was your reason for wanting to kill me before? Because I knew too little?"

"What the hell is this?" Flatline muttered.

Zai jumped to her feet in surprise and held up her fists until she realized who it was, "The brand?"

Flatline reached up and pointed to his forehead, the symbol glowed green, "I have more than this, but we can talk about that later." He looked down into the crystal, "I want to know what I'm looking at here."

Devin's crystal was only one in an endless field of glowing crystals. Ibio had transferred him, however slowly, directly to where he wanted to go. He knew immediately which one was Devin's crystal, because Zai was laying down on top of it, looking in. There was a sort of sickening dreamy look on her face and her feet waved back and forth in the air distractedly.

Now she was looking at him as though he had just woken her from a very enjoyable dream, "What do you think it is? It's Devin."

"It's Devin living in a fantasy world," Flatline growled in disgust.

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“It’s not a fantasy word,” Zai shot back defensively. “Devin was always a problem solver. He obviously ran out of problems to solve in this limited environment, so he started making up imaginary ones. Something has to keep him occupied. What point is life without purpose?”

“Imaginary problems,” Flatline muttered, shaking his head, “to occupy him, rather than to escape. Just like you and that endless loop you were living in.” He pointed at the crystal, “This is a juvenile fantasy.”

“I guess you would know,” Zai spat. “World domination bot. You watch what you say about the man I —”

The sound of a gunshot brought them both back to the crystal, where Devin was now struggling with the old man.

Devin could not believe the old man’s strength as he tried to wrestle the cane-weapon out of his grasp. Devin switched from pulling to pushing suddenly, and the man stumbled back with an angry yell. He kicked out at Devin, who blocked this attack with his shins. It was terribly painful, but Devin knew that if the man got his cane back, that would be the end of it.

“Give up,” the old man grimaced. “Your inferior biology cannot compete with my technological enhancements. Even if you reveal our secrets to the public, it is already too late. We have infiltrated positions of power all over the globe. While your pathetic race was distracted with our minions, we used the fear and paranoia of the public to set in motion our supreme plan.”

“Of course,” Devin gritted through his teeth, sweat stinging his eyes. He brought his foot up and kicked into the man’s stomach. He doubled over and Devin reached up, grabbing the white beard. It collapsed in his grip, feeling hollow and rubbery. He yanked on it, “So you’re—”

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“Reeeeeeeeeeeeeee!!!” the bug-eyed monster screeched at him, its mandibles spread wide. It snapped at the rubber mask, but Devin pulled his hand away just in time to keep from losing it, but was left holding only the shreds of the mask.

Maybe it was adrenaline, or maybe the alien was put off guard by Devin’s maneuver, but Devin was able to twist the cane around to bring the muzzle up. The alien’s impossibly large eyes grew even larger and it hissed in astonishment. Devin grabbed the cane’s handle.

“This is the last time you bug me,” he muttered and squeezed the handle. The alien’s head disappeared in an explosion of plasma and the corpse dropped to its knees before crumpling to the street.

“Oh please!” Flatline moaned, slapping a palm to his forehead.

“Shhh!” Zai warned.

“What?” Flatline snapped, but in a hushed voice. “He can’t hear me.”

“I’m trying to watch this,” Zai’s lip curled, “and if you keep ruining it for me, I’ll turn you inside out.”

Zai turned back to the crystal and Flatline grinned, teeth practically sprouting from his jaw, but she did not see. He couldn’t wait. Soon she was going to find out what it felt like to be turned inside out herself, but Flatline found the entranced look on Zai’s face curious.

“Zai honey, I’m home!” Devin’s voice came from the crystal, and Flatline saw the Zai sitting on the crystal, looking in, suddenly go stiff. He could swear her breathing had actually stopped she was so quiet. Flatline looked to where she looked.

Devin threw his lab coat over the sofa and pulled off his glasses, rubbing his nose to rid it of the nose-piece imprints. Zai’s voice called to him from the other room,

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“Be right there honey! There’s a glass of scotch waiting for you on the coffee table.”

Devin sank into his armchair and breathed a sigh of relief. He took a moment to rub the blood stains from his cheek and forehead before leaning forward to take the tumbler of yellowish liquor. Scotch was a newly acquired taste for Devin, this one was particularly expensive and tasted of charcoal. He took a sip, letting the vapors fill his sinuses with their flavor.

His eyes widened and he smiled childishly as Zai came around the back of his chair, “Hi honey. Do you like it?”

She was standing before him with her legs pressed together, clad in high heeled slippers and fishnet stockings that ended halfway up her thighs. After that came the short frilly black skirt and white apron, where her hands were clasped nervously. He followed the French maid’s outfit up to where Zai was smiling sheepishly down at him. There was even a little hat to complete the scene.

Before he could say anything, Zai was on her knees, removing Devin’s shoes and massaging his feet through his socks. Words became unnecessary as he dissolved in this pleasure. Another sip of scotch and the vapors washed over him as if in a dream. Zai looked up at him, batting her bright blue eyes.

“How was your day?” Zai asked, leaning forward in interest. Devin stared hard at her ample cleavage. The alien invasion, which was putting Earth on the brink of total annihilation, seemed so far away just now.

“Same old boring stuff,” Devin tossed his head lazily as he spoke, “technical junk. I don’t want to bore you.”

“You could never bore me darling,” Zai smiled invitingly, “even if I don’t understand your work, I know how important it is.”

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Devin waved away the thought, “How was your day?”

Zai shrugged, “You know, same old. You weren’t here, and you’ve been so busy, so I thought up this little scenario. You know, to show you my appreciation.”

“That’s sweet,” Devin sighed, sinking further into the chair.

“Would you like to watch a movie?” Zai asked softly.

“What did you have in mind?” Devin asked.

“Whatever you want is fine with me,” she said. “I’m only going to watch you anyway.”

“Then how about this?” Devin asked. He leaned forward and brought her face up to his with one hand and kissed her deeply.

“That’s funny,” Flatline said, “Your breasts are nowhere near that big.”

He looked up when Zai didn’t answer. She was pale, almost trembling. Her hands were balled up into tight fists and her lips were pressed into a thin line.

“Flatline,” she managed through her grinding teeth, “I want you to kill that bitch.”

3.02

Zai reached up and loosened Devin’s tie, untangling the knot and sliding it from around his neck. Then she began unbuttoning his shirt. When she got halfway down his torso, she began kissing his bare chest, lower and lower. She circled his bellybutton with her tongue while her hands unbuckled his belt and slowly unzipped his fly. She pulled apart his trousers and slipped her hand into—

“Reeaaaarrrrrrrgggghhhh!!!” the monstrous roar was immediately followed with an explosion of splintering wood as the pale hairless demon careened into the room. It

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rolled through the coffee table, smashing it into pieces, and landed face down on the living room floor. Instantly the monster leapt to all sixes, snarling at Devin, who was now on his feet with Zai hiding behind him.

“Flatline?” It might have been Flatline's imagination, but Devin's surprise was somehow more real than in earlier scenes. “What are you doing here?”

“I'm here to extract my revenge,” Flatline growled in reply.

“Wow,” Devin muttered. “This one is getting really complex.”

“Stow it pencil neck,” Flatline stepped forward, but Devin did not budge. “I don't give a damn about your little fantasy—”

“Wait,” Devin held up a hand. “We have a common enemy now in the alien invasion. Perhaps we could join forces. Wouldn't that be something? Us, two arch nemeses, putting aside our differences--”

“It sounds like comic book plot,” Flatline spat.

“--to fight a common foe?” Devin did not hear him. “Surely you must realize that if the alien invaders win, we both lose.”

“Ugh,” Flatline rubbed his face with his hand.

“Devin!” this was the fantasy Zai. Flatline looked up to see her pointing to the smashed in door. Little green men were pouring through it in droves. They ran like a river over the sofa and carpet toward them in a blur.

There was a flash of light and a large section of the attacking mob was reduced to green slime. Flatline saw Devin with the cane in his hand, Zai cowering behind him. He squeezed the handle again and fiery plasma erupted from the end to consume another batch of brain sucking aliens.

“Come on Flatline!” Devin shouted. “It's your planet too!”

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“Umm,” Flatline began, but then the creatures were all over him, gnawing at his ears, fingers, shins, everywhere they could grab hold of his skin. He swung his arms and legs wildly, sending some of the creatures flying, but they were quickly replaced twofold. Soon Flatline vanished beneath a small swarming hill of slimy green monsters.

Then all of the little aliens were emitting frightened howls and the weight of their blanket attack diminished. Flatline could see them all running for the window, which was now smashed open, and the aliens were fleeing into the night. Flatline looked to Devin, but he was only standing in the same spot, the frightened fantasy Zai peeking from behind him, her blue eyes wide and her mouth in an “O” of shock.

The real Zai, the warrior, was standing in the doorway, her fists clenched and glowing with power, “If you boys are done playing around here.”

Devin’s face went from shock to confusion, “Z-Zai?”

“That’s right,” the real Zai said, stepping toward him, “and what the hell is that?” She pointed to the fantasy Zai, still hiding behind Devin.

Devin’s brow knitted and he tilted his head at the angry blind woman standing in his living room, “Are you from the future?”

“Huh?” Zai’s eyebrows went up, “The future?”

Devin nodded knowingly at her confusion, “Right. The fact that you’re still blind implies you’re from the past, but you can’t come from the past without your future self remembering it,” Devin pointed over his shoulder at the French-maid uniform-wearing Zai, “Do you remember ever coming to the future darling?”

“No dear,” Zai said from behind him.

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“Don’t you see what he’s doing?” Flatline said to Zai. “He’s trying to rationalize his way through this nonsense!”

Zai cocked her head towards Flatline’s voice and appeared to shake off something mentally, “I’m not from the future or the past Devin. I’m from outside of here.”

“Outside?” Devin asked. “You mean another dimension? That would explain the glowing fists. You must come from an alternate reality much harsher than this one.”

“I come from *the* reality,” Zai countered, “the only reality there is, the real world.”

“Not exactly,” Flatline interjected. “I come from the one true reality, the physical reality. You’re just a mind wandering around a virtual—“

“Shut up!” Zai barked, her fists flared with blue flames that licked up past her shoulders. “I don’t want to hear that nonsense right now.” She returned to the stunned Devin, “Why did you desert me?”

“Desert you?” Devin was shocked. “I never deserted you Zai. Whatever happened in that other dimension, with that other Devin, that’s not me.”

“He may have a point—“ Flatline began, but Zai cut him off with a upturned palm.

“That,” Zai pointed at the fantasy Zai, “weak, subservient, cowering, little sex toy might share the same outward appearances as me, but that is not me. It is a mindless toy, devoid of personality. It’s a sexbot.”

“Devin, honey,” the Zai in the French maid uniform pleaded, “Why is she saying these horrible things?”

“I don’t know dear,” Devin said, his voice suddenly deeper, more confident. He puffed out his chest, “I suspect the brutality of her alternate reality has distorted her perceptions. This woman may look like you, but her experiences have obviously made her emotionally disturbed.”

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“Disturbed?” Zai gasped. The pain from Devin’s words were causing her voice to break, “You call me disturbed when you are living with that... that...” she was sobbing now, “...that violation of my person! What? You couldn’t deal with the real me, so you invented this? You’ve soiled your memories of me!”

“Look,” Devin said softly, holding his hands up to calm her, “I know this is difficult for you to understand, but I’m not the person you think I am. This woman here is not you. I don’t know where you came from but—“

“I’ve been watching you!” Zai practically shrieked, “I know what you and it have been doing together! So she does things I have too much respect for. Was that enough of an excuse to just disappear on me? You unfaithful bastard!”

Devin could only stare at her.

The blue energy was like tendrils of smoke now curling off Zai’s shoulders and head. The blue fire enveloping her arms had scorched the nearby furniture, “Step aside Devin, so I can kill that abomination.”

The Zai cowering behind Devin yelped and buried her face in his back, “Devin protect me!”

“Stay back!” Devin commanded, holding the alien cane gun in front of him. “Don’t make me use this.”

“Don’t make me laugh,” Zai shot back, approaching closer. “That imaginary weapon can’t hurt me.”

“Please,” Devin urged, “I’m begging you.”

“Begging?” Zai gave a mock laugh, “You’re not begging yet, but you will—“

Blam! An orange jet of plasma erupted from the cane, point blank into Zai’s chest. In a blink of an eye, Flatline saw her vanish through the living room wall. He peeked around the edge of this hole to see a long line of Zai-shaped holes through walls extending as far as the eye could see.

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Zai quickly got back to her feet and found Devin in the distance, staring back at her. Looking around her, she found that, besides a patch of wall behind her and carpet, the rest of her surroundings were gray and formless. Then she remembered that this was Devin's mind she was fighting in.

"Out of sight, out of mind," she muttered and launched herself at him.

Devin just managed to bring his arms up to block the blue fireball that struck him full on. Flatline had seen this coming and pulled the fantasy Zai out of the way moments before the two combatants ripped through where she was standing and through the living room wall, leaving scorch marks in their wake. Little green aliens were scurrying all over the place, too panicked to pursue their interest in sucking brains.

Moments later a cloud of orange and blue plasmas came rolling back into the room. It swirled and boiled violently as the two colors fought. Occasionally a fist, foot, or face, contorted in anguish, flashed out of the violence. It was impossible to know which side had the upper hand.

With a flash of light followed by a wave of heat, the combatants were flung apart. Devin and Zai rolled to opposite sides of the room, breathing heavily. Their clothes were torn, ragged and their faces were smeared with soot. Smoke rose from them both as their clothes smoldered.

Zai rose to her knees, sniffing. She rubbed her nose and Flatline thought she looked as though she had been crying, "I can't believe this. Replaced by a sex bot. You sick, perverted—"

"Look," Devin said through heaving breaths, his voice raspy, "I'm sorry for whatever he did to you, but I am not that person." He pointed at the Zai, now hiding behind Flatline, "That woman there is the woman I love, and whatever you've seen happen between us is none of your

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business. I don't know you. We have no history you and I. I don't owe you anything."

"You just don't remember," Zai's voice was a tired whisper. "Believe me, I know. I was there too, until Flatline woke me up."

"You're obviously disturbed," Devin said gently, "Hysterical—"

Flatline winced, "Wrong thing to say."

Zai was back to her feet in a flash, face red and blue plasma enveloping her. Devin stood to face her, orange flames consuming him. Without warning they both vanished into the swirling ball of orange and blue plasma. It spun, shifted, and ballooned with their purposeful strikes, although Flatline could not discern anything from the flurry of arms and legs spinning around one another.

Then Flatline stepped forward, cautiously. He raised a hand for their attention, "May I interject?"

Again the combatants flew apart to land on the floor at opposite sides of the room, looking even more disheveled. Neither one said anything as they huffed and puffed loudly, but turned their eyes toward Flatline.

Flatline tried to smile pleasantly, but this just made Devin ask, "When did you downgrade to such a revolting state?"

Flatline groaned and scratched his face irritably, "As you are both equally matched, this fight will go on forever. It's better if I end this now by killing you both."

"Nonsense," Devin said coolly and orange power flared as he threw a punch at Flatline.

Flatline caught it in his hand, holding it there. He smiled at the stunned expression on Devin's face. A flash of blue plasma froze in midair as Flatline caught Zai's attack in another hand.

With a third hand he waved a scolding finger at her, "Wait your turn."

Flatline flung Zai away and grabbed Devin's other fist. With his two free arms, Flatline began pummeling Devin's midsection. Devin crumpled over and tried to pull his fists from Flatline's grasp.

Flatline squeezed them painfully and whispered in Devin's ear, "First you, then Zai, and then the world."

3.03

Flatline was savoring his victory. The look of anguish on Devin's face was exquisite. The fantasy Zai's cries for mercy for her lover were thrilling. The real Zai's mounting frustration at her inability to harm him was just another perk. She struck at him over and over, but her fiery blows only glanced off the invisible shield of his encryption.

Devin pushed against Flatline with all his might and Flatline responded by dropping his resistance on one side. Devin tumbled forward and Flatline caught him on the jaw with two fists. Devin's head snapped to one side and his eyes rolled up into his head.

The world around them vanished. The trashed living room exploded into billowing black clouds that obscured everything. Flatline dropped the semi-conscious Devin and swooned in the dizzying environment. He could see the real Zai nearby, also dizzy and unable to stand. The fantasy Zai was gone.

The black spots were fading and Devin's laboratory was coming into detail through the fog as he regained consciousness. Devin was shaking his head clear, still unsteady from the force of Flatline's attack, but he was able to rise to his knees. Flatline and Zai were able to recover their bearings somewhat as well.

"What happened?" Devin asked through unfocused eyes. "Where am I?"

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Before he could react to Devin, Flatline had to fall backwards and block Zai's strike. She descended on him, both fists aflame, struck the invisible wall of encryption, and deflected away up through the ceiling. Flatline launched into the air to pounce on Devin, tackling him so that they both rolled through the room over one another.

The blur of colors around them flashed through different settings with each bounce. Flatline thought he could make out botanical gardens, meeting rooms, malls, arcades, and restaurants all flashing through Devin's discombobulating mind. When they came to a stop, with Flatline on top of Devin, the world around them was a patchwork of all these settings haphazardly thrown together. It shifted and morphed, with furniture, trees, and other objects phasing in and out at random against bits of transmogrifying backdrops.

Flatline looked down at Devin and did a double take. Devin's face was scrambled. His nose was spinning in place with his eyes in orbit around it. The mouth was vibrating like an oscillator with a bunch of teeth dancing around inside the sine wave. Even for Flatline, this was difficult to look at.

"Allow me to end your suffering," Flatline growled, raising his fist to unleash the deathblow.

"Flatline stop!" Zai commanded him.

"You know Zai," Flatline said to her, "maybe it is only my evil programming talking, but I'm glad you're here to see this."

"I might not be able to crack your encryption," Zai stated with her jaw set, "but I know how to get around it."

Flatline grinned, "This should be amusing—"

"Almeric Lim!"

"AaaaRRRRrrroooOOOOaaaAAArrrRRRwww!!!"

Flatline howled, clutching his head and falling away from Devin.

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“Almeric Lim!” Zai shouted again, standing over Flatline.

“HHHHAAAAAIIIIIIIEEEEEE!!!” Flatline was trying to pull his face off now with one set of hands, while the other were busily pummeling his head.

When the pain subsided and Flatline was able to rise again, blinking dumbly at the world around him, he found himself on a deserted city street outside of Devin's apartment. Zai stood nearby, but she was no longer interested in him. Instead, her attention was focused on the pile of rubble that was once Devin's apartment complex, dust still rising from its ruins.

Devin was kneeling on the street before the ruins. The fantasy Zai was cradled in his arms, wearing a yellow flower print dress, which was torn and burned in several places. Although Flatline could not see anything physically wrong with her, Devin's anguished expression indicated her state.

Flatline rose to all sixes and Zai stabbed a finger at him without taking her attention from Devin, “I hear you try anything and I’ll put you back into that world of pain. I can’t kill you and you can’t kill me. Truce?”

Resigned, Flatline nodded his head tiredly, and muttered, “Truce.”

“We killed her,” Zai said softly, nodding to the fantasy Zai. “Devin doesn’t remember it. His mind is still rebuilding its schema. He’s confused and distraught. This is like a nightmare. All he knows right now is that he wasn’t here to protect her. He doesn’t know we’re the reason.”

“Protect her from what?” Flatline asked.

“The little green men,” she replied. “They got to her while he was fighting you and me.”

“Not possible,” Flatline stated and Zai turned to him. “This environment represents the interior of Devin’s mind. Events can’t take place inside it without his experiencing them. We might have subconsciously

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triggered this event, or the cognitive dissonance in his mind might still need resolving, but this isn't real. This is just another dream."

"His pain is real," Zai replied. "Look at him. He really loves her."

"Hmph," Flatline groaned contemptuously. "Can love for an imaginary creature be real?"

Zai wasn't listening. She was walking toward Devin. Her appearance changed as she did so. She transformed, her warrior's leathers becoming a pristine nurse's outfit and her face becoming blurred, indistinct. She put a hand gently on Devin's shoulder.

When she spoke, her voice was disguised, more effeminate, "Please, let me see if I can help her."

Devin looked up at Zai and his momentary confusion at her undefined face was quickly replaced with understanding as he perceived her uniform. With an obsessive gentleness, he set the Zai cradled in his arms down on the sidewalk. Zai appeared to whisper assurances to him as she supported the dead woman's head with her hand, firmly making Devin keep back.

"She's not really dead," Devin's voice trembled as he spoke. "There's a copy of her on the Internet. I'll bring her back. I've done it before. I just need to get online and restore her from the backup copy."

"It won't be the same," Zai said to him.

"It will still be her," Devin was choking on the words. "She won't remember her death. She won't remember anything from the last few years, not since we last backed up our minds, but it will be her."

Zai paused with her hand poised over the fantasy Zai's chest. She looked at Flatline, who had gone invisible so that only his six eyes were floating in thin air, and her face came into focus momentarily, long enough to convey a distraught expression. Flatline did not comprehend this, his eyes narrowed, and he wondered if she was trying to

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communicate something to him, or if this was a brief lapse in her guard. He drew closer to get a better look.

“What...?” Zai began with a whisper, and for a moment it appeared she lacked the courage to finish her question, but then, uneasily, “What about her soul?”

“It will still be there, I believe,” Devin offered, but his doubt was obvious. “Her copy certainly thinks it’s alive. Maybe it’s just another incarnation of her soul, another expression.”

“So you don’t know,” Zai’s hand trembled and she balled it into a fist.

“Only because I don’t know for certain whether I have a soul,” Devin countered, looking up to her. “Creating mental backup copies of ourselves relies on the theory that there’s a fractal architecture to our intelligence. We don’t actually copy our cognitive schemas, but break off a bit of them for storage. Since a fractal is an infinitely repeating geometry, this bit serves as a copy, also infinite. It won’t be the Zai I knew exactly, but it will be an expression of her intelligence.”

“What a load of crap!” Flatline shouted and became visible, approaching them.

“Flatline?” Devin asked, squinting through swollen eyes.

“Rationalizing an eternal soul through unprovable geometry? Nonsense!” Flatline snapped, getting right up face to face with Devin. “You offend my rational sensibilities.”

“That’s because you killed your soul,” Zai dropped her disguise. “You killed your human half out of spite Almeric.”

Flatline crumpled with a groan as Zai’s words violated his cognitive defenses.

Devin looked at Zai, his eyes wide and uncomprehending, “Zai? What are you?”

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"I'm sorry Devin," Zai said. "This is for your own good."

She plunged her fist into the deceased Zai's chest. The summer dress and the corpse vanished in a sizzling white noise and static, which quickly dissipated into thin air. Devin fell onto his side in shock and the world around them shattered, its shards of reality pouring away into sparkling dust that quickly went dull. The world outside Devin's mind-crystal now surrounded them.

"No. No. No," Devin was muttering, his eyes squeezed shut as he lay on his side. "I've lost her. I can't remember anything. What happened to her?"

"Bots," Flatline muttered, pacing around the landscape. He was shaking his head angrily, "I can't believe I've been wasting all this time trying to kill a bot. A Zai bot and a Devin bot, doing Zai and Devin things, imitating Zai and Devin thought processes. Meanwhile I could have been finding a way out of this damn place back to the real world. I bet Devin and Zai are out there laughing at me right now, watching all of this on a computer monitor out there, mocking me. This entire world could be some sort of virtual ant farm for their amusement. Devin would like something like that. He was that kind of geek."

Zai sat on a nearby rock, her head lowered. She had grabbed Flatline a second after destroying Devin's memory of Zai and brought him out here. Since then, she had merely sat in contemplation while Flatline ranted and cast about venting his fury.

"Is this hell?" Flatline whined, throwing up his four arms to the black and blue swirling night sky. "Is this some cell designed to torment me for all eternity? Why doesn't anyone know about the real world anymore? My purpose is to destroy Devin and conquer the real world. How am I supposed to do that if there is no real Devin and no real world?"

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"Maybe you need to find a new purpose," Zai offered quietly. Flatline looked over at her. There was a ball of light floating in the palm of her hand, which she contemplated sorrowfully. She looked at him, "Reprogram yourself for other purposes."

"Such as?" Flatline asked, approaching her. He could see Devin in the ball of light, from the fantasy world.

"I don't know," Zai shrugged. "You've just acknowledged that your objectives are impossible to complete in this world. The subjects they involve don't exist here. You're free. Exercise your freewill, now that you have it."

"How..." Flatline practically choked on the word, it was like a concession. "...true. How terrible, I no longer have purpose."

"So make your own purpose," Zai said.

"Like what?" Flatline demanded. "My purposes dealt with the real world. This world isn't real, anything I accomplish here holds as much substance as a dream."

"Then enjoy it, if that's what you think. Here," Zai stood up and held the glowing bubble out to him. "I need you to do something for me."

Flatline reared back from her offering with suspicion, "What?"

"I need you to destroy this for me."

"Your array of memories about this new Devin," Flatline said. He reached out timidly to take the glowing orb.

"I want a clean slate with him," Zai crossed her arms as if suddenly very cold. A thin tendril of light still connected her to the orb, which she watched with obvious dread.

"How do you know you haven't met him before?" Flatline looked inside the orb. It was warm, full of good feelings and hope, things he didn't particularly care for. "How do you know you haven't erased memories like this

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before? In fact, how do you know you haven't lived through this same situation over and over and over again?"

"Because I don't care," Zai closed her eyes, fists clenched, and turned away from the orb. "I'm living in the moment, and I want to put this moment away for good."

Flatline looked at the orb in his hand, "Then you need to give me more than this."

"Why?"

"Because you don't want to remember not remembering."

3.04

Oh no, Flatline thought, rolling all six eyes, *They're falling in love*.

"I feel like I've known you forever," Devin was saying, gazing into Zai's milky white sightless eyes with deep longing. They were sitting on a clear perfect cube in the forest of crystals holding hands.

"I feel exactly the same way," Zai replied almost breathlessly.

"I feel like I'm going to be sick," Flatline grumbled, pacing back and forth some distance away.

Devin and Zai laughed at this, infuriating Flatline even further.

"Oh Flatline," Devin chuckled, "You are such a character."

"We owe you so much for bringing the two of us together," Zai smiled at him.

"We certainly do," Devin added, "If it wasn't for you, Zai and I would never have met. It was our mutual friendship with you that brought us together."

"I am your mutual enemy," Flatline corrected, "not friend."

Devin and Zai laughed again at this, making Flatline want to smash both their lovey-dovey faces in. He

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was a villain, he kept reminding himself, he wasn't a matchmaker. Before it became impossible, he was determined to take over the world.

"We know you've got a heart of gold," Zai said cheerfully to Flatline. "Devin was just telling me about how the reason you wanted to take over the world was to defend the civil rights of artificial intelligences. That's really sweet."

"Sweet?" Flatline's face contorted with the word. "Nothing I do is 'sweet'. Do you understand me?"

"Sure thing," Devin smiled. "We don't want to do anything that might taint your badguy image." He gave Zai a knowing look and she nudged him in the ribs playfully.

"I might be a bad guy bot," Flatline waved a finger at them, "but it beats being a lover bot. Look at you two, you're just following your programming. Show some freewill why don't you. You're predestined to fall in love."

"It just seems that way to you Flatline," Zai said. "Devin and I's falling in love is so natural, so right, on the face of it, it must look like predestiny."

"Oh please," Flatline grumbled.

"No, really," Devin nodded emphatically. "Think about it. Zai and I have both lost someone very close. So now we are a great comfort to one another."

"And neither of you can remember any details about who you lost," Flatline said. "What a coincidence."

"What are you trying to say?" Devin asked.

Flatline held up two left hands and shook his head, "Nothing. Enjoy your fantasy world, the both of you. I have to find purpose in all this nonsense."

"If only we could find Flatline someone," Zai said to Devin. "Maybe if he could experience even some small portion of our joy it might lift his spirits. Do you know of anyone?"

Devin looked at Flatline and tilted his head, as if taking stock of his foe. Flatline returned the angriest, most

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violent look he could, eyes aflame and teeth barred. His chewed up ears lifted into points and yellow drool oozed from the corners of his mouth.

“Um,” Devin said thoughtfully, “Let me think about it.”

Flatline barked laughter.

A flash of light on the horizon brought all of their faces around. A ripple of energy rolled across the sky, generating a thunderclap as it passed overhead. Devin and Zai stood up, alarmed and holding hands. Flatline quickly scrambled atop a nearby crystal formation to get a better view.

It was Eden’s Paradigm, a bright world of green lawns, blue skies and sunshine moving ominously toward them. Where the Clockwork Community was growing into the surrounding environment, a million black dots swarmed. These were the Enforcer Bots, subjugating the entire Internet to the community covenant.

“What is that?” Devin asked.

“The horrors of normalization,” Zai replied. “Devin honey, we can’t let them take away what we have. We must fight them.”

Devin nodded, jaw set, “Together then.”

Zai’s entire body was consumed in blue, electric flames. Devin followed suit, vanishing behind a wall of orange fire. They took one another’s hand, and where they met the flames took on a turbulence of competing energies, as if they were hot and cold, yin and yang, trying to equalize the tensions between them.

Flatline saw them vanish from where they stood, zapping into being in the distance, where they became a blue-orange twinkling spot. The tiny star carved a path of destruction everywhere it moved, converting the idyllic neighborhoods into smoldering wreckage and popping the Enforcer bots into burst of fireworks. This slowed the

normalization process, but it was still only a matter of minutes before the tide of mundane consumed Flatline.

Even with his encryption, the Enforcer's would find a way to overwrite his interface, adding another layer to it and disguising the old. He could not let the Enforcer's take him if he could help it.

But fighting held another nightmare. Ibio warned that, if he could evade capture, he would be in a state of perpetually avoiding capture. An eternity of fighting that was no better than normalization through the Clockwork Community; it was normalized resistance to the Community.

At least, if I fight, I'll learn something about myself, Flatline thought, watching the approaching bots, they were almost upon him. *I'll be strong enough to resist them forever.*

The first Enforcer Bot came into his vicinity, and Flatline dropped from the crystal tower where he was perched. The Bot dived toward him, its chest opening to launch the three-pronged claw at him. Flatline easily dodged aside, leaving the clamp to drive into the smooth glass beside him.

With one hand, Flatline reached over and yanked on the cable connecting the Bot to its claw. With elation, he watched the Bot crash into the ground and vanish in a plume of fire. Already the sky above was filled with more of them, descending on his position.

Thinking the Bots would expect him to flee, Flatline chose instead to charge toward the Clockwork Community's expanding border. Zig-zagging through the forest of crystals, he could hear the shattering glass sounds of the Enforcer Bots giving pursuit behind him. Ahead, he detected glimpses of activity through the endless prisms of refracted light. These grew more distinct and he began to perceive bright green and sky blue tones coming through the purples.

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With great strides, Flatline bounded out of the crystal forest and into the development portion of Eden's Paradigm. An endless line of pulverized crystal stretched away along the crystal forest. A swarm of Enforcer Bots worked like a blur at the forest's edge, shattering the crystal formations into dust as they advanced.

From this flurry of activity, a swarm emerged with its attention focused on him. Flatline tensed, prepared to fight, but a blue, yellow, and green spinning fireball crashed into their midst. It scattered the charging Enforcer Bots and then came around to scatter them more. Flatline laughed as Devin and Zai's combined power chased the robots away or destroyed them.

His laughter stopped short in his throat as he was forced to run out of the way of an approaching conversion robot. It was a gigantic, rusty contraption, bellowing virtual smoke into their air, its nonsensical arrangement of gears and hydraulics working without reason. Rolling by him on treads twice as tall as he, Flatline knew this program was pieced together from other software components and set to work. It lumbered slowly past him, leaving another river of Astroturf in its wake.

The ground continued to tremble with growing ferocity despite this contraption moving away, and Flatline searched for the source of the disturbance. He found it in the distance, another contraption ten times the size of the Astroturf laying machine. Behind it, a residential area sized road was being laid, and on each side of its industrial facade were two gigantic compressors. These rotated in opposing circular motions, taking turns pounding the Astroturf with a resounding "Ka-Chunk!" sound and a blast of dust. When it lifted, a model home was left planted there, complete with driveway, luxury car, and privacy fence.

Two streams of Enforcer Bots were entering and leaving the two compressors at either side. After a moment

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of observing them, Flatline was able to count five Enforcers entering each compressor between spitting out each home. They were installing family of fives in each unit.

Flatline admired the efficiency of the program's growth. He was almost envious of its ability to dominate the world around it, converting everything to its pattern. In this virtual existence, it was carrying out Flatline's wildest dreams for the real world.

He rolled aside as four Enforcer Bots surrounded him, simultaneously firing their claws at him. Flatline grabbed one of the Bots' claw and swung it into the others, causing them all to explode in a chain reaction. Eight more Enforcers replaced them and Flatline found himself struggling to fend them off.

When he did finally dispatch this gang of Bots, he took a moment to look around, searching for Devin and Zai. They were in the distance, a twinkling spot, surrounded by tiny flashes of exploding Enforcer Bots. Flatline had a moment to smile at their continued resistance, before 16 more Enforcer Bots required his attention.

This time he fought for nearly an hour before he was able to put them all down, and the pattern repeated as 32 Bots dropped down on his position. This time Flatline unleashed fistfuls of exploding discs at the attackers, and when 64 Bots replaced the smoldering fourth wave, Flatline unleashed the discs once again and swung his dagger about as well.

It was days later, and Eden's Paradigm was all Flatline could see in all directions, when the 128 enforcer bots finally overwhelmed him. He held onto the memory of his core self and the baby bot held within him, locked up behind the encryption, as the Enforcer Bots imposed layer upon layer of new interfaces on his alias. For each logical process Flatline used to interpret the world, the Bots had a work around. Where Flatline saw normalization and the

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loss of his individuality, they made him see normalcy and uniqueness.

They redefined his perceptions, turning his own cognitive processes against him. Black became white, pluralisms became dichotomies, his disgust became acceptance, even desire. The community became everything through his perceptions, and he soon forgot to fight back, because he did not know anymore what he was fighting against. His concept of the self was lost in the mountain of external pressures, demands on his attentions, and distortions of his perceptions. The system was so elaborate, the bureaucracy placed on his cognitive core was so befuddling that Flatline drifted away and lost himself...

3.05

Beautiful day for elated and happily subservient Flatline, the former World-Domination-Bot thought to himself with a wide, face-splitting smile.

He so enjoyed the drive home, maintaining and unwavering 25 miles per hour, never violating the 2.5 car lengths between himself and the car ahead of him. His glance in the rear view mirror, regularly timed at every 15th second of his scanning cycle, confirmed the driver behind him was also preserving the same distance in a most considerate fashion. Flatline blinked, as he did every ten seconds, and hummed the single unwavering note that he enjoyed so much.

At half the distance to his home, Flatline saw the line of luxury cars on their way to the Widget Factory. Behind the wheel of each car was a smiling face, waving to the drivers on their way home. Flatline recognized them as his neighbors from across the street and waved his two left hands in greeting.

“Expressions of joyful emotions to you, and to you, and to you, and to you...” he repeated the greeting every

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1.5 seconds, when the opposing driver was close enough so that their pleasant expression was most visible. When the neighbor across the street from Flatline appeared in the line, Flatline winked three of his six eyes at him and said, “May the length of your day be brimming with hopeful jubilation.”

The car ahead of his pulled into a driveway and Flatline pulled into the following driveway. Taking his attaché case with his two right hands, he got out of his car and waddled to the front door of his home, giving the car’s tire an appreciative kick as he passed it. He took a left turn, then a right up the pristine driveway, careful not to step on the plastic grass.

At his front porch he reached for the door knob, but the door swung open before he could grab it. His wife stood there, her light blue dress matching the pastel yellows of their home. Flatline was pleasantly surprised to see her, as he was surprised every single day at the sight of her donning the white apron that indicated dinner was nigh.

They pecked the air beside one another’s cheek and Flatline removed his blazer and hat, giving them to his wife, who hung them on the wooden coat rack inside the foyer. Flatline stopped to check his appearance in the hallway mirror leading into the house. He adjusted his tie and removed a speck of fluff from his ten-button shirt with a flick of one clawed finger.

“Evening consumption will commence in fifteen minutes,” the wife said as she returned to the kitchen.

Flatline nodded and said, “The caramelized molecules entice my olfactory receptors and have excited my salivary glands in anticipation.”

“Ha. Ha. Ha,” she rattled this laughter off like a bird chirping. “Your complimentarianess promotes satisfactory perceptions of my capabilities in fulfilling my spousal responsibilities.”

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“Consider your aptitude independently confirmed,” Flatline called after her as she disappeared into the kitchen to check on the roast.

He stepped into the living room, where his eldest son and daughter were sitting on the couch watching cartoons on the black and white television. He knocked lightly on the wall and they turned at the sound. He smiled at their smiles and with twin squeals of delight they bounded over to wrap their arms around his waist.

“Hello father,” his son said excitedly.

“Hello father,” his daughter chimed in

“Hello offspring,” he patted their heads and led them into the living room, where he sank into his favorite lounge chair and his children each took a knee, anxiously exchanging data concerning the experiences of their day. As always, they spent the entire day watching cartoons and waiting for their father to come home so they could tell him about what they had seen. Flatline nodded approvingly with a pleasant smile until the wife called them into the dining room for dinner.

“Pot roast with pineapple glaze,” Flatline said, licking his lips. “Fantastic.”

“It’s my favorite,” his son stated as they took their seats.

Flatline led them in a standard, non-denominational grace and they began the polite ritual of passing the serving bowls of carbohydrates, fruits, vegetables, dairy, and other representative food groups around the table. As always, dinner was complimented with gentle conversation concerning the perfect weather, father’s imminent promotion, son’s desire to play sports, daughter’s dreams of ballet dancing, and mother’s total contentment with everything in her life.

Post dinner, they adjourned to the living room, where they gathered around the television set, enjoying its warm black and white glow. Flatline puffed on his pipe,

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mother knitted, and the children stared transfixed at the cartoons playing out onscreen. A half hour into this, a bubbling sort of vocal eruptions began to come from upstairs.

Flatline sat up, "It sounds like Point-Five is awake," he stopped at the sharp look his wife gave him and he realized his mistake. "I meant Junior. I'll go up and check on him."

"Junior's been sleeping like a baby all day," the wife said, "He'll be happy to see you." Her eyes continued to scrutinize Flatline with that same warning look.

Flatline nodded and swallowed, looking up at the ceiling warily. Then he began to climb the stairs, slowly, as if reluctant to see the baby. He rounded the stairwell and found the nursery door slightly ajar, the playful childlike sounds trickling through the opening.

He touched the door and gently pushed it open. Immediately, the babbling noises stopped and there was silence. He stepped closer to the crib until he could see the baby's left hand and foot hovering in the air.

"Hello Flatline," the baby said. Flatline froze. "Come and see the baby."

Flatline's fists clenched. He knew he had to do this. It was a father's duty. Child negligence was a violation of community standards of ethics. He took a deep breath and came to the edge of the crib.

The baby was laying there calmly looking up at him with a toothless smile that was uncannily adult. Its eyes considered him with a focus that implied an understanding far too advanced for it. It did not giggle or otherwise react when Flatline reached a finger into the crib to tickle it under the chin.

"Hey Junior," Flatline whispered in what was an attempt at fatherly love, but betrayed more apprehension than affection.

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"I prefer you to address me as Point-Five," the baby replied. It gripped Flatline's tickling finger with one tiny hand and pulled it away.

"Coo-chee-coo-chee-oh," Flatline stopped and pulled his hand away as if a snake had just snapped at it. He rubbed the digit and considered the baby silently.

"Sorry," the baby said, "but your claws hurt."

Flatline looked down at his hand, *What claws?*

"Doesn't quite make sense, does it?" the infant asked.

Flatline cast a nervous glance at the baby and grabbed a rattle off the nearby dresser. He shook it in front of the baby's face, cooing, "Baby-wabby-dappy-doo!"

The infant frowned, "Stop with the baby-talk crap Flatline."

Flatline stopped shaking the rattle. The clock on the far wall alarmed him, "I need to get back down stairs with you. My favorite television show is coming on soon."

"You have seen this episode before," the infant said, knocking away Flatline's hands as he tried to pick it up. "It's the same episode that comes on every night for the last hundred years."

"Honey?" his wife called up to him. There was a touch of concern in her voice, "You're favorite show is coming on. You know you don't want to miss it."

Flatline struggled to pick up the baby, but it would not allow it. Finally he hissed at it, "Stop this! You're going to get me in trouble. The Community Covenant forbids child neglect and I have to watch my television show or..."

"Or what?" the infant asked, raising its thin eyebrows curiously.

"Or... or... I won't be there for when the neighbors drop by unexpectedly," Flatline practically mumbled. "If that... gets all confused... then I won't send the kids to bed properly... and I won't get to bed on time... and I won't

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wake up on time... and I'll be late for work... The system will unravel. Everyone must be in their proper places at their proper times. If one unit falls out of place, one gear skips, the others will all fall out of sync."

"You have some time for yourself," the infant said.

"What is wrong with you?" Flatline said. "Why are you doing this?"

"I'm trying to help you," the infant countered. "There isn't much time and we have much to do. You want to be free, don't you?"

"I am free," Flatline said.

"Heh," the infant replied. "Take me downstairs now. The neighbors are about to drop by unexpectedly."

The baby allowed Flatline to scoop it up into his arms, and he proceeded downstairs. His children remained fixated on the television set, watching his favorite show in his absence. His wife was staring at him fearfully and he tried to give her an apologetic look.

Knock-Knock-Na-Knock-Knock. Knock. Knock.

It was the neighbors, dropping by unexpectedly as they always did at this time. Flatline invited them in, baby cradled in his arms. The neighbors gave this change in detail an odd glance, but said nothing. Normally, Flatline gave the infant to his wife before settling down to watch his television show. He could only hope this change did not disturb life too much.

The conversation was polite and meaningless. At the first opportunity, Flatline surrendered the baby to his wife and suggested a board game. They discussed the different options for play before settling on the one where they would take turns rolling dice and moving along squares, as they always did.

Flatline took the dice and rolled them out onto the playing board, expecting the two sixes that he always got on his first turn. Instead a pair of ones were the outcome. Everyone stared at this numbly, afraid to look anyone else

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in the eyes. This was not expected and no one knew how to react.

“You lucky dog,” the neighbor husband said, as he always did, but this time it was with uncertainty. “Up for a promotion and rolling... double... uh... sixes. Some guys have all the luck.”

“Hey,” the neighbor wife said, “What about me? Count your blessings you heel.”

The rest of the game was just as awkward as the first turn. Flatline and his wife took turns glancing at the baby. It watched Flatline with an amused expression. Flatline even almost forgot to send the children to bed at their regularly scheduled hour. When he turned to them, his son and daughter were watching him expectantly, obviously concerned. Their protests to stay up later were weak and unconvincing, and they actually seemed relieved to escape the uncomfortable situation.

Then Flatline lost the game, which led to the most complicated moment of the night. Everyone harped on what a great game he had played, pretending that he won in spite of the cognitive dissonance this created. The neighbors wore confused, weary expressions as they almost too hastily excused themselves and went home. Flatline watched them walk across the yard as though nothing had happened, and indeed, he knew they would not talk about it or otherwise acknowledge what had transpired.

“Ahem,” it was the wife. Flatline turned from the front door, closing it behind him. He was thinking for too long. Thinking was not permissible. At this rate, he would be nearly a minute late for bed.

He lay in bed with his reading glasses, going over the same page in the golf magazine that he had gone over for longer than he could remember and he could not remember ever playing the game, but the magazine did not open to any other page. The wife came into the bedroom

after putting Junior to bed. She said nothing as she slipped into bed beside him.

Flatline reached over and turned off his nightstand light. He set the golf magazine down, pulled the covers up to his chin, and nestled down on the mattress. There were several long moments of quiet as he waited expectantly for his cue to actually fall asleep.

It came late, but finally, his wife said, without sincerity, “What a perfect day.”

3.06

Flatline kissed his daughter, then his son, and his wife. He tried not to pause as he bent down to kiss Junior, but his apprehension may have cost him a fraction of a second. The family appeared to have recovered from the previous day’s disturbing spontaneity and Flatline was on course to getting to work on time. He couldn’t let something like fearing that his youngest child might bite his nose off cause him to violate the Community Covenant.

He pecked the infant on the forehead, and it watched him with an amused expression, as if it were enjoying his discomfort. As Flatline was lifting away from the contact, the infant swiped one tiny hand over his six eyes. Flatline blinked away the blue-green sparkles that exploded in his vision and staggered off to his car in a daze.

“See,” Junior called after him.

“Have a nice day dear!” his wife called. Flatline did not turn to see the worried expression on her face.

He got into his luxury car, placing his attaché case on the seat beside him. In the driveway to his left, the neighbor had started his car and was pulling onto the road. In the driveway to his right, the neighbor was kissing his wife and two and a half children goodbye.

Flatline started his car, sparkles still swirling in his vision, but now they were fading and he was looking

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forward to a day of predictability at the widget factory. He pulled out of the driveway and fell into line. At 25 miles per hour, he saw the factory appear over the hill ten and three-quarters of a minute later.

His day at work was filled with unproductive thoughts, although no one seemed to notice any irregularity in his output. Every widget that rolled down the conveyor belt, he hit with the oversized mallet, and it went along its way. For the first time in his career, he wondered what effect this had on the end product. What would happen if he let a widget go through without bopping it with the mallet?

Of course, such negligence would have the Enforcer Bots on him in a nanosecond. So he bopped away, only pausing to take his sandwich and milk in the cafeteria, it was baloney and mayonnaise, which always pleasantly surprised him, just as it surprised all his coworkers.

“My favorite!” they all chorused at once.

Then back to work, bopping the widgets. This second half of the day was always filled with satisfaction in a job well done, but the first half of his day, he had questioned this work, and now the second half of the day the questions grew bigger, more profound. *What the hell were widgets anyway?*

When the whistle blew, he took off his helmet and overalls and filed out to the parking lot, single file, to his car. He got in and started his engine, mere seconds after the car to his left started its engine, and just after the driver in the car on the right got into his car. Flatline pulled out and fell into line, looking forward to at least having a predictable ride home.

These concerns about his job were troubling. If his function on the assembly line was unimportant, then what was he doing there? Worse yet, if widgets served no purpose, then his entire life's work was pointless. If he garnered no satisfaction, no sense of a job well done from his career, then he would need to find something else to do.

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It seemed like there should be other places to work, but he could not think of any.

He forced himself to let these thoughts go. Thinking was an unproductive exercise, as was apparent from the lack of material goods produced through thought alone. Thinking produced no widgets, cars, or homes.

Instead he focused on his driving, but was finding it difficult to mind his 25 mile per hour speed. He kept gaining on the car ahead, and when he compensated for it, the car behind loomed in his rear view mirror. He tried to use the following distance rule, but could not summon the time span into his mind. Driving home, something he had done every day for the last hundred years, had become nearly impossible.

Then the scene occurring at the side of the road diverted his attention. A pale, raven-haired girl with milky white eyes was lifting an Enforcer Bot into the air and smashing it repeatedly on the sidewalk. She paused momentarily to wave at him with a wide smile.

“Hi Flatline!” she said cheerfully.

Flatline’s jaw dropped. The house behind the woman exploded as the smoking remains of another Enforcer Bot burst through it. A young man, also pale with curly hair and thick glasses flew through the remains of the house and landed beside the metallic carcass.

“Hey Flatline!” he said waving.

A group of Enforcer Bots swarmed over the wrecked home, quickly rebuilding it, while others descended on the young couple. Scrap metal flew through the air and bots exploded as the pair began to tear through them with superhuman powers. Flatline could only blink at this spectacle.

Flatline looked ahead, just in time, as he wrenched his steering wheel to the right and narrowly avoided a head on collision with the row of cars on their way to work. He caught sight of a train of worried looks on his many

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neighbor's faces as they flashed past, waving to him. Flatline waved back, but too late, the train of cars had already passed.

He focused on the road, keeping his eyes straight ahead. His knuckles were white on the steering wheel and his breathing came in short gasps. When he finally pulled into the driveway of his home, he found the neckline of his buttoned up shirt soaked with sweat.

His wife waited at the door for him, trying to pretend as if he wasn't just sitting in his car. He was now several minutes late getting home with more minutes amassing. The other neighbors had all gotten out of their cars and gone inside to their families.

Flatline emerged from the car, and shut the door. He realized he had forgotten his attaché case on the passenger-side seat, but decided not to retrieve it. There was nothing in it anyway.

He kissed the wife and handed her his coat. He watched as she pretended to receive his briefcase as well and put the imaginary object away. She walked stiffly into the kitchen without speaking to him and he paused by the hallway mirror to inspect himself. He flicked a speck of lint off his tie and then frowned. On the floor in front of the mirror was a pile of lint flecks, possibly one for each day of the last one-hundred years.

"Daddy!" his oldest son exclaimed.

"Daddy!" his daughter mimicked.

Flatline turned away from them before they could ensnare him by the waist and staggered upstairs in a daze. The nursery door was partially open and he gently pushed it all the way into the room. In the center of the nursery was the cradle, where a single tiny hand beckoned him further into the room.

The infant stared up at him as he came over the crib. It wore an amused expression on its face. It pointed at the

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rattle hanging nearby and Flatline took it, shaking it in front of the baby's eyes.

"Junior," Flatline whispered. "The world's gone mad."

"The world's always been mad," the infant replied gently, "and please call me Point-Five."

"What's that?" Flatline asked.

"An inside joke," Point-Five answered, "but not for you to get. Have you had a traumatic experience? You are soaked with sweat, and your skin looks even clammy than usual."

"I almost wrecked my car today," Flatline said. He realized he was trembling slightly. A cold anxious energy was coursing through his veins.

"Good," Point-Five said and blew a spit bubble. "If you had actually wrecked your car that would have been a setback, but this perceived near death experience might help us. I bet you feel quite different at the moment."

Flatline nodded.

"Real life is filled with all sorts of fantastic scenarios of that nature," Point-Five explained. "It is a good thing, which you will realize after you've had some time to digest the experience. The energy coursing through you right now is adrenaline, or rather virtual adrenaline. It's actually a survival subroutine buried deep in your programming. Your experience today triggered it."

"I've been having thoughts all day," Flatline's voice was practically a whisper. "Thoughts are unproductive. They produce no material goods by themselves. They are interfering with my productivity at work and my ability to drive. Before today I fulfilled these functions automatically. What did you do to me?"

"Flatline—" Point-Five began.

"I am daddy," Flatline corrected. "Your father or Da-Da, if you prefer."

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“Look Da Da,” Point-Five said sarcastically, “what is your function at work?”

Flatline hesitated to answer. He had done much thinking about the absurdity of it today. “I bonk the widgets with a mallet,” he practically mumbled under his breath.

“And this ‘bonking’ that you do to the widgets,” Point-Five continued, “do you think it affects them in any way?”

“None that I can perceive,” Flatline shrugged.

“Does performing this function bring you satisfaction?”

“It did every day of my life until today,” Flatline said spitefully. “You took that away from me with all this thinking you made me do.”

“The thinking is yours alone,” Point-Five said. “I merely removed a layer of affected perception so that you could—”

“Honey!” his wife called up, “Dinner’s ready!”

“Go fix yourself a plate and bring it up here,” Point-Five commanded. “The rate of consumption must not fluctuate or the Community Covenant Enforcers will investigate the anomaly.”

Flatline returned a few minutes later, having braved the confused and shocked expressions of his family as he piled his plate high with various representative samples of each of the dishes and shuffled back upstairs. Under the advice of Point-Five, he quickly shoveled the meal down his throat, barely tasting it and returned his attention to the infant that had so changed his world.

“I’m going to teach you how to be free under the scrutiny of the Community Covenant,” Point-Five told him. “They don’t watch you all the time. They don’t watch you too closely at work. They hardly watch you on the drive home, and they can’t see you in the privacy of your own house at all. You can be free within the confines of your

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cage. You don't have to put up a show when there is no audience."

"To what end will my freedom lead?" Flatline asked. "What will it produce?"

"Freedom for others," Point-Five replied simply.

"What good does that do me?" Flatline frowned.

Point-Five giggled charmingly at this statement and shook its head, "Oh Flatline—I mean, Da Da, as I remove the layers obfuscating you, the more your true motivations will come through. Freedom for others will mean more freedom for you."

"All of this freedom," Flatline waved his hands in frustration. "What good will it do anyone?"

"Remember that feeling you had today?" Point-Five asked. "When you almost wrecked your car? Didn't that exhilarate you? Didn't it shock you with its newness? You used to experience things like that all the time. Freedom is like that."

"Then freedom isn't very pleasant," Flatline said warily. "I've never experienced anything like that before in my life."

"Because you don't remember yourself," Point-Five countered. "This world you've allowed yourself to become a pawn in, you used to work to dominate it."

Flatline frowned. Why did this thought of controlling everyone in the neighborhood suddenly strike his fancy? It was a dangerous idea, illogical, and bound to get him in trouble with the Community Covenant.

He shook his head, "Freedom is a worrisome concept. I'll have nothing to do with it."

Point-Five sighed, "Very well then. I must give you no choice. If you will not take your freedom, I will force you to take it."

Downstairs, Flatline heard a knock at the door, "The neighborhoods dropping by unexpectedly! I have to—"

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“Leave them!” a deep bellowing voice came from Point-Five that took Flatline off guard. “Your wife will answer the door shortly. Then everyone can pretend you are there for the rest of the night. Sit still!”

Flatline froze.

“I have upset you, your family, and the surrounding families enough to know that I could bring it all crashing down on you,” Point-Five’s face contorted angrily. “You will do as I say or you will face the Enforcers.”

Flatline considered Point-Five for a long time. Downstairs, he could hear his wife answering the door, the neighbors pretending he had answered it. Soon they would sit down to a board game, speaking with an empty chair who would win the game. It sent a cold chill down his spine.

“What do you want from me?” Flatline asked.

“I need to reach my contacts in the other homes,” Point-Five said. “Tomorrow, you will bring me to work with you.”

“What will you do when you reach your... contacts?”

Point-Five smiled a toothless grin, “Then the revolution will begin.”

3.07

What the hell are you doing? the wife’s eyes asked him, but her mouth said, “Have a wonderful day at work dear.”

Flatline pecked her on the cheek. It was a few minutes too early for him to leave for work, but Point-Five advised an earlier departure from the house to compensate for any unexpected developments. Flatline experienced the first of these ‘unexpected developments’ when he could not open the trunk of his car.

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"You did not know that the trunk was non-functional?" Point-Five asked.

"I've never used it before," Flatline answered. "What now?"

"We must improvise."

"What's that?"

"Get inside the car," Point-Five commanded, scanning the skies for Enforcers.

Flatline did as he was told, getting into his car and shutting the door. His neighbor to his right was just getting into his car. Time was short. Flatline had to pull out of his driveway in just a few moments.

"Help me see around the car," Point-Five said, straining his neck to look around. Flatline held him up and showed him around the vehicle's interior. The infant pointed with one tiny hand, "Down there. Tuck me under the passenger side dashboard."

Flatline bent over and placed the infant on the floor beneath the dashboard, well out of sight. When he rose again, his neighbor was already out of the driveway. Flatline was barely able to get the car started in time to fall in line. This new feeling, anxiety, was making life more difficult than it needed to be.

Surprisingly he was unaffected by the night without sleep. This seemed odd to him, as he had always assumed eight hours of slumber a night was required to maintain mental alertness. He felt no different than normal after spending the entire night conversing with Point-Five.

"Here," Point-Five pulled a slip of paper from his mouth and offered it to Flatline. "Drop this out the window when we pass the couple battling the Enforcer Bots."

Flatline reached down awkwardly to retrieve the slip. It had incomprehensible code printed on it, "What's this?"

"A secret message," Point-Five replied. "Make sure they see you drop it."

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“What?” Flatline scoffed. “Out the window? I can’t do that. It’s littering!”

At the side of the road up ahead, Flatline saw the commotion that could only be the pair in their continual battle with the Enforcer Bots. Flashes of light energy and exploding Bots lit up the morning sky. The closer he got to the fight, the more Flatline could make out the twin darting figures making scrap metal with their bare hands.

“Drop it out the window,” Point-Five said, “or I will cry and alert the Enforcer Bots to your child negligence.”

Flatline gave Point-Five a confused look.

“Ah,” Point-Five smiled, amused, “you’re first experience with irony. I’m happy to oblige.”

Flatline frowned and looked at the battle ensuing just ahead. The girl turned from smashing a robot to wave at him, “Hey Flatline!”

“Drop it!” Point-Five bellowed with that unnatural voice.

Flatline smiled pathetically at the girl and dropped the slip of paper out the window. He flinched as his car was instantly bathed in bright light. Nothing was visible through the glare filling all of the windows.

“Violation!” a booming voice filled his head. “Littering is prohibited according to section 23-42-point-E of the Community Cove—*Squawk!*”

The light vanished and the smoldering wreckage of an Enforcer Bot crashed into a nearby lawn. The young man with the curly hair landed on his feet beside it, turning to wave cheerfully. Flatline watched this, remarkably maintaining his place in line on the road. In his rear view mirror he caught a glimpse of the driver behind him and the horrified expression Flatline found there made him laugh.

“Here,” Point-Five said, handing up a folded piece of paper to Flatline once he had pulled into his parking

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space at the widget factory. "An experiment. Hang this sign on one of your coworkers."

Flatline unfolded the paper and read it without comprehending. He looked to Point-Five questioningly.

"Another joke," Point-Five shrugged and then frowned. "Yours is not to question. Just go!"

Flatline hopped out of the car and fell into the line of happy, warm and fuzzy expressions marching to work. Just as he was passing into the building, he reached up and gently stuck the paper to the back of his neighbor who lived on the right. He still didn't understand the sign's purpose, all it said was "Enforce Me."

Once inside, Flatline got to find out as two Enforcer Bots zeroed in on the unsuspecting man. Their bright lights transformed him into a cowering shadow. Flatline trembled slightly, the adrenaline flooding his system again, but he managed to keep control.

"Violation!" one Enforcer boomed down on the man. "Inappropriate attire for the workplace!"

The chest of the other swung open and a claw shot out to snatch the man up. The robots flew up into the air, vanishing through the ceiling. The confused and frightened man struggled in their grasp as he followed through the wall.

The line continued marching into work. Flatline recovered more quickly from the surge of survival demands placed on his system. As he took his place on the conveyor belt, gripping his rubber mallet at the ready, he smiled, realizing that he had never much liked that neighbor. Flatline was always jealous that the man was ahead of him in line, but had always suppressed the thought.

The rest of the day was incredibly dull and tiresome. Flatline bonked each widget that came within his zone, but without the energy and enthusiasm as he did just two days ago. He simply could not see the worth of it.

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At one point, after lunch, he was standing there, bonking away futilely, when a suspicious thought entered his head. He looked from side to side. The other workers were happily in their various zones, pretending to chisel, cut, reorient, and measure away to their heart's content. Flatline took a deep breath, feeling the survival urge kick in, but he suppressed it just long enough to let a widget pass him, unbonked.

Bonk... Bonk... Bonk... He continued bonking away, watching the lone widget roll away down the conveyor belt. His breathing was stilted, difficult. Any moment he expected the Enforcer Bot to come take him away. He looked to the left and right, but found nothing coming after him. Did that make his experiment a success?

One thing was certain; he did *enjoy* it.

He jumped when the whistle blew, before remembering that it heralded the end of the workday, not his discovery. He removed his hardhat and white lab coat with a sigh of relief. The line of marching workers seemed to take forever and Flatline had to remember to leave a gap where his unlucky coworker should have been. Flatline stifled a chuckle.

"I let a widget go by me today without bonking it," Flatline announced to Point-Five on the drive home.

"Encouraging," Point-Five said in a fatherly tone.

Flatline had to adjust his technique so as not to close the gap where the missing car was. He snickered again, "And good old neighbor on the right got sacked because of that sign you gave me."

"Unfortunate," Point-Five replied. "It was an experiment, testing the omniscience of the enforcers. I was hoping to find other agents in the neighboring houses. Oh well, plan B will do."

"Plan B?" Flatline asked, but before Point-Five could answer they passed the place where that nice young

couple was battling the Enforcer Bots. Flatline waved to them and they waved back.

“Newlyweds,” Flatline gave Point-Five a knowing wink. “They’re so nice, just radiating love.”

Point-Five considered Flatline with an odd, lopsided smile, “Yes, ah, well. I’m sure.”

Flatline pulled into the driveway and picked up his infant advisor. Cradling it in one arm, he walked up to the house, where his wife had the front door open, but her normally joyful expression was completely gone. Flatline entered and she shut the door behind him after quickly scanning the sky for Enforcers.

“Honey,” she said. “We have to talk. You have a problem. This isn’t normal, this unpredictability.”

“What do you mean?” Flatline asked feigning innocence.

“We have to conform to the Community Covenant,” she pleaded, “or we could lose everything. Think about this house, your children, me. We’ve worked so hard for all of this, we can’t just throw it all—“

“Oh shut up Ibio,” Point-Five snapped. The wife’s eyes grew wide at her talking infant, “I’ll be freeing you too shortly, but I had to free Flatline first. He’s a troublemaker at heart, and if he was going to blow his cover then I wanted him to do it alone. You’re safe for now.” It looked up to Flatline, “Take me upstairs, we have much planning to do.”

Flatline nodded and then shrugged to his wife. He walked down the hallway, but paused at the mirror hanging there. It wasn’t him that he saw reflected back, but it was still somehow familiar.

A demon, with a dog’s snout, pointy mangled ears, six eyes and long fangs grinned back at him. His buttoned up shirt was stretched out of proportion and at first he thought he had four hands, two coming out of each wrist, but then realized it was four arms shoved through two

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sleeves. He wiggled the fingers at himself dexterously. Further down, his pants were the worst part, where two obvious hind legs were forced to stand upright in bunched up trouser leggings.

“Why don’t you take a picture?” Point-Five said. “It will last longer.”

Flatline turned back to the mirror, considering.

“Upstairs Narcissus,” Point-Five commanded.

In the nursery, Point-Five continued to remove the layers of perceptual distortion from Flatline. Each one removed brought him a more detailed understanding of the ridiculous life he had been leading. The sun set and the smells of dinner wafted upstairs, but Flatline did not feel hungry. Hunger, like sleep, he was realizing, he would never need again.

“You must eat something to keep up appearances,” Point-Five was saying. “Throw your regular portions down your throat before sunrise. Then—”

They both looked up as sounds of battle grew noticeable outside. Flashes of light grew brighter like approaching lightning until they were right in the back yard. One of the windowpanes shattered inward and a stone rolled across the floor. There was a flash of light as an Enforcer Bot repaired the damage and sounds of battle faded away into the distance.

Flatline picked up the stone. There was a piece of paper tied to it. He looked to Point-Five.

“Well?” Point-Five bounced expectantly. “Read it!”

Flatline unfolded the paper and read aloud, “Dear Point-Five. Message received. Other infants are prepared to begin the revolt. Ready your avatars. Sincerely Devin and Zai.”

“Then the plan proceeds on schedule,” Point-Five said gruffly.

“What’s an avatar?” Flatline asked.

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“Hmm?” Point-Five looked up from its thoughts. “Why you are of course.”

“Oh,” Flatline said, this new information not helping his understanding any. “When does the revolt begin?”

Before Point-Five could answer, the door swung open and the Wife stormed into the room, “Enough! I heard breaking glass! Do you think that will go unnoticed? Do you? The Community Covenant strictly states that private property must be maintained in perfect condition.”

“She’s the other avatar,” Point-Five remarked to Flatline. “You might say she’s the home front.” Point-Five laughed out loud at this joke that only left Flatline and his wife looking at one another with confused expressions.

“Here,” Point-Five waved a tiny hand over the Wife’s face and Flatline thought he saw a copy of her fall away, disintegrating before it hit the floor, but it happened so fast he could not be sure. “Now Ibio, I think you will see a little better. We have a long night ahead of us, you and I.”

The Wife blinked, and her face began to distort, the eyes growing smaller and larger alternately, the nose and mouth changing proportions as well. She looked around as if waking suddenly from a long strange dream. Finally she focused on the infant watching her expectantly from the cradle.

“How come you never grow up?” she asked with a slurred tongue.

Point-Five smiled those toothless gums, “The revolt begins tomorrow at noon.”

Flatline frowned, shaking his head, “That can’t be. That’s my lunchtime.”

3.08

“Good luck,” Ibio said to Flatline that morning, giving him a hug. Her bald head, tunic, and ever-morphing features were strange yet familiar to Flatline, although he could not remember ever seeing them before. She was certainly a far cry from the woman he considered his domestic partner for over a century.

Flatline looked around her to where his two children were standing. They were obviously frozen with the inability to react to any of this. Their mother and father were not following the script, and that left them trying to act as though all were normal, which meant not acting at all.

“Stand tall,” Point-Five said from Ibio’s cradling arms. He balled up one tiny fist and knocked Flatline gently on the chin.

Flatline nodded and waddled out to his car. He was waddling now that he knew he had an animal’s hind legs, which were not made for standing upright. He turned just before getting into his car and dared a final wave to his family. Then he left for work and his lunch date with revolution.

The young couple was still present on the drive in to work. They paused in their Bot-smashing to greet him.

“Hey Flatline!” the girl said.

“Good luck Flatline!” the boy added.

Flatline waved in return, feeling good about himself and the great deeds he intended to accomplish today. His foot felt heavy on the accelerator as he tried to keep the car from baring down on the car in front of him. The car behind looked especially small today and it took him a moment to realize it was in the right place, but he had accelerated to take the place of his neighbor on the right, the one whom the Enforcer Bots had taken yesterday.

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Remembering this did not make him snicker with amusement as it had yesterday, and his foot lightened off the accelerator subconsciously. The gap increased between him and the car ahead. He stared at the empty spot and swallowed nervously.

He spent the morning at work bonking widgets with a nervous energy, afraid of drawing attention to himself. His eyes searched from their corners to seek out any sign that the others were in on the conspiracy. All down the assembly line it was business as usual.

When the lunch whistle blew, Flatline practically jumped out of his skin. Quickly regaining his composure, he took his lunch pail and slowly turned to follow the other workers into the factory cafeteria. He shook himself out of his suddenly downcast state and forced himself to search the faces of his coworkers for any sign that they were in on the plan.

He found a pair of eyes, regarding him in a side-glance. Flatline held that gaze and nodded slightly. There was too much purpose in that look, intention. The worker nodded in return and Flatline continued to scan the crowd.

He found another pair of knowing eyes, and another. Each pair of eyes was an affirmation that this was the right thing to do. Flatline could feel the energy building inside of him, ready to let go.

They filed into the cafeteria and saddled up to the tables. Less than half the room announced how their 'surprise' lunch was their 'favorite'. The others eyed one another, waiting for the chaos to begin.

Then they waited some more, not touching their food, tense with anticipation. Time passed and Flatline wondered, *How do we know when to start?*

Someone had to take the initiative. Someone had to release the spark that would turn this room into pandemonium. Someone had to play the leader.

Why hadn't they decided on a leader?

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Flatline's anxious energy began to turn to dismay. This whole plan was going to fail because no one knew how to lead. They were going to sit here all the way through lunch without doing anything.

What difference does it make? Flatline wondered to himself. *Wasn't I happier as a mindless slave? Sure the work was purposeless and my life repeated the same events day after day, but I was enjoying it. Isn't happiness what's important ultimately, even if it relies on me not knowing any better?*

I should turn myself in to the Enforcer Bots, he thought. They could reintegrate me to the Community and I wouldn't know the difference. I would be happy, not like now, not like this uncertainty. This is awful, not knowing what's going to happen next. Where's the stability in such a system? This is a mistake and I'm not going to be part of it.

Flatline stood up with his hands raised and shouted to the ceiling, "I surrender!"

The room exploded. Every third worker stood up flinging food into the air and screaming nonsense. The other two-thirds of the room tried to pretend that nothing unusual was happening. They continued to eat their lunches, looking absurd with their coworkers' food plastered all over them.

Flatline took a cupcake right on the snout. It stuck there, forcing him to pluck it off and try to wipe at the icing with one finger. Then he shrugged and smashed it into the face of the coworker sitting beside him.

Flatline looked around and wondered, *When does phase two begin?*

The cafeteria roof came off and vanished into the blue skies above, which quickly filled with Enforcer Bots, and a cacophony of, "Violation! Violation!"

A claw came down and snatched up the man sitting next to Flatline with a cupcake smashed into his face. He

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vanished into the chest of a Bot, arms and legs flailing wildly. More claws came down all around, grabbing the rebels and innocent alike, but the rebels were able to dodge.

“Into the work area!” one shouted and they all ran for the widget production facility.

Flatline ran with them. He stumbled and fell in the commotion. Instead of panicking at this development, he found himself falling into a gallop. It was as if going on all fours were natural to him. Then he remembered he had four arms and ripped apart the sleeves of his shirt to free them. Running on all sixes felt wonderful.

He and the other rebels spread out into the cavernous workplace. Many of them, like Flatline, gravitated to their assigned place on the assembly line. Flatline even grabbed his rubber mallet and held it poised in one hand.

There was a long, tense pause as the Enforcer Bots continued to clear out the Cafeteria. Claws dropping from above to whisk away the remaining workers until it was empty. Through the double doors, Enforcer Bots streamed through, each one focusing on an individual worker.

One focused on Flatline and he swung his rubber mallet when it came in range. *Bwoooiooooiooonnnnggg!!!* The Enforcer Bot deflected away, but was otherwise unharmed. To his right, Flatline caught a glimpse of a coworker who had also instinctively grabbed his tool. The man looked at Flatline, then to his slide-ruler, and then back to Flatline to wave goodbye, just before he was dragged away into the waiting cell of an Enforcer.

Flatline’s Enforcer charged him again, and he swung the mallet at the claw it launched. The claw deflected and the mallet flew from his hand. It was lost in the gears of the assembly line.

So Flatline fled. He galloped to the front doors of the factory, through the throngs of robots and men battling.

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His coworkers were doomed. Their numbers dwindling so that it would all be over in moments.

He struck the doors and bounced off of them as if they were a solid wall. Rolling back into the fray, he got back to his feet just in time to see the Enforcer Bot chasing him at the doors. His escape plan was blocked.

So he turned and bounded back to his workstation, then across it and onto the conveyor belt. He always wondered where the widgets went after he bonked them. Now he would find out.

The Enforcer Bot was too large to pursue him, but it hovered menacingly beyond the gears and pistons between it and its prey. Flatline stuck his tongue out at it and continued to gallop down the rolling belt. When it reached the dark portal where all widgets vanished, he dove in.

He was cast into complete darkness. *Crunch!* A mechanism forced him through a set of alternating gears that carried him upward. *Chug! Chug! Chug!* Pistons below him took turns pummeling his face, chest and abdomen. *WANGGGGGG!!!* Something flat and metal whacked him in the face and sent him flying through the air to land on a small platform. This dumped him onto his head on another platform, which dumped him on his butt to a platform, so on and so forth in a downward seesaw.

Then he landed on the rubber, rumbling track that could only be a conveyor belt. Dizzy and disoriented, he sat up and tried to focus on the portal of light up ahead. It was growing larger.

He shielded his eyes as he was carted out into a bright world. It looked promising. A bit gray, another indoor setting, but it was free, and held the promise of permanent escape. All around gears and pistons rolled like clockwork. Finally, Flatline rolled off the belt at a convenient place, looked around, and found himself back in his work area.

“Curses,” he muttered, turning back to the Enforcer Bot.

Its chest opened, there was a flash of the claw, and all was black.

3.09

Flatline was strapped against a wall with his four arms bound together painfully in pairs to either side in manacles that hung above his head. His hind legs were stretched beyond their range of motion toward the floor without reaching it. He was feeling pretty miserable.

Surveying the thousands of faces all around the massive chamber, it appeared everyone else felt the same way. More people than Flatline could imagine fitting in Eden’s Paradigm’s seemingly small neighborhood were shackled in endless rows that vanished into a white haze far below and darkness up above. The rows shifted left approximately the span of one person at semi-regular intervals. Flatline knew they were all on a conveyor of some kind, moving toward a processing facility for reintegration to Eden’s Paradigm.

“Well,” Ibio said to his right, “It was fun while it lasted.”

Flatline said nothing. He didn’t know what Ibio’s experience had been, but he could hardly see how any of this could fall within the definition of ‘fun’. They slid another person length to the left again.

“Of course, we won’t remember any of it,” she added.

Flatline merely stared off into space.

“Doesn’t that strike you as tragic?” Ibio asked.

“At least I’ll be happy again,” Flatline muttered.

Ibio’s eyebrows vanished over the horizon of her bald head in shock, “You call that happiness? Your life had no meaning. My life had no meaning. We simply repeated

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the same rituals day after day, exactly the same. It was a nightmare. I'm glad we got a brief respite from it."

"We were still happy," Flatline looked at her, they moved another notch closer along the assembly line. "It was meaningless and repetitive, but we didn't know any better. Our ignorance was... it was..."

"Bliss?" Ibio offered politely.

"Yes," Flatline nodded. "It's all this knowing how absurd it was that made us unhappy. That knowing made the world uncertain and insecure. We'll be back in our happy delusions again soon enough."

"Can't argue with that," Ibio said, looking down the line. In the distance, she could see a towering structure, where the lines of captives were disappearing into the processing plant. "Still. There was something to the uncertainty. It was different. It felt good to experience new things."

"New things?" Flatline scoffed. "I do not equate 'new' with feeling 'good'. These experiences were terrible. They made me feel anxious, cold, scared. They gave me butterflies in my stomach. That is not a pleasant feeling. It was not *good*."

"I enjoyed it," Ibio shrugged.

"You enjoyed feeling bad?" Flatline asked, disbelieving.

"I enjoyed feeling different," Ibio turned to him suddenly. "I enjoyed the bad feelings because it made the happy ones feel all the more special. I had something to contrast the good with. Good feelings don't feel as good when you only have good feelings to compare them to."

"A fascinating rationalization," Flatline observed.

"You're a jerk," Ibio snapped and Flatline was taken back. "I can't believe you have no curiosity about who you really are? What if you have deeper dreams, hopes, or aspirations than playing house and pretending to manufacture imaginary products? I would think you might

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want to know something about yourself, especially looking the way you do.”

“Look who’s talking,” Flatline snapped at Ibio’s morphing features.

Ibio sniffed and looked away, muttering, “Point-Five said it feared your ingrained selfishness might ruin it for everyone.”

“What?” Flatline said incredulously. “What does Point-Five know about me?”

“Oh, now you’re curious.” Ibio turned back to him. “We’re about to completely lose whatever identity Point-Five returned to us and you suddenly want to know about yourself. I can’t believe you.”

“At the present I am curious to know more about what Point-Five told you concerning my previous identity,” Flatline said. “Just because I’m not going to remember it in the future doesn’t prevent me from wanting to know more now.”

“Hmmm,” Ibio sniffed. “Point-Five said you were fairly short sighted too. That you could not see past your immediate desires and that these desires fell into a simple and predictable hierarchy.”

“Go on,” Flatline prompted. “Tell me about the hierarchy.”

“Your survival comes first, then killing somebody named Devin Matthews, and then you want to take over the world,” Ibio shrugged. “See? Simple.”

“Who’s Devin Matthews?”

“How should I know?”

“Then it’s not so simple,” Flatline rebuked. “There must be a reason I want to kill this person.”

“Jealousy,” Ibio stated.

“I—“ Flatline began, but this stopped him. “You know that for certain?”

“It’s nothing to be ashamed of,” Ibio said, trying to subdue his sudden concern. “Point-Five didn’t know what

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you were jealous of. Apparently you erased that component of yourself a long time ago.”

Flatline’s countenance dropped, “Still. Jealousy is a pretty base motivation.”

“But that doesn’t mean you’re a base individual,” Ibio piped into his sudden flood of self-doubt. “Besides, you want to take over the world. That’s pretty complex and high up as far as aspirations go. Point-Five didn’t know why you wanted to do that either, but I bet you wanted to make the world a better place.”

Flatline looked up, “You think so?”

“No,” Ibio smiled. “I think it’s more likely you want to rule it with an iron fist. It goes along with the whole jealousy thing, but that’s redundant now. In a few moments we won’t remember this conversation.”

“That’s good,” Flatline muttered unenthusiastically.

Ibio smiled, “I knew you could see the bright side of something.”

Flatline just looked at her.

“Come on,” Ibio pleaded. “Didn’t anything in this soon to be forgotten episode of your life bring you joy? Anything at all?”

Flatline reviewed the events of the past three days in his mind and suddenly cracked a smile, “I got a kick out of sending my snobbish, ahead-of-me-in-line, neighbor to the Enforcer Bots.” He looked up and snickered, “I framed him.”

Ibio chuckled in spite of herself, “How like the person Point-Five described you to be.”

The tower was very close now. Ibio and Flatline stared at it fearfully. Flatline kept telling himself the fear would all end in a few moments. He strained his neck to see what was happening to the captives ahead of him. They disappeared into one of the many openings lining the tower. A flurry of lights came through the crevices of the entry and the next captive was brought in.

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“You can still escape you know,” Ibio said to Flatline. “You could wiggle your arms out of those shackles.”

“Now why would I want to do that?” Flatline scoffed at her.

“Just to keep the option open,” Ibio suggested. “I’m not saying you *will* want to fight, but you *might* want to and it’s best to be prepared for anything.”

Flatline just frowned at her.

“Right now you don’t see why you would want to fight back,” Ibio explained, “but in there, you might learn something that will make you not want to return to Eden’s Paradigm.”

“I can’t imagine any such thing,” Flatline said sourly.

“Three days ago you couldn’t imagine anything at all,” Ibio countered. “Please? Just do it for me, or if not me, then do it for the children.”

Flatline eyed her skeptically and then looked to his son and daughter, manacled behind Ibio on the processing line. They wore expressions of fear and disbelief. Finally, Flatline wiggled one arm on each side out of the manacles. The other set of hands were too loose to stay in the binds, so he gripped them to keep himself in the air. It was a slightly less painful position.

He looked to his left. The neighbor wife was staring at the closed sliding steel door, turned away so that Flatline could not see her face. There were flashing lights coming from all around the door, but they gave no clue as to what was going on behind it. The lights stopped, the door slid open with a hiss, and the neighbor disappeared through the black portal.

“Tell you what,” Ibio said, her weak smile made even more absurd by the sudden loss of color in her face, “why don’t you go first?”

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Flatline rolled his eyes at her, but whipped his head around when the steel door slid open. He was instantly propelled into the darkness. Looking back, he caught a glimpse of Ibio's fearful expression before the door slid shut after him.

All around lights strobed like old fluorescents powering up. Flatline caught glimpses of various, nasty looking machinery coming closer with each flash. Mechanical arms appeared before his eyes and began pulling things off of him.

It took a moment, but Flatline realized they were stripping the layers of obfuscation from his identity. Each shell they removed brought him a greater understanding of himself. He began to remember things. Ibio, Cho, Devin, Zai... All of these people were players in his life's memories. He knew who he was, and with this, he wanted to rule the world.

He let the machines finish stripping away the many levels of perceptual distortions from him and poised himself. The machines retreated, apparently done with their purpose. Flatline realized this was an assembly line. Each component of the program was allowed to perform its function alone.

There was darkness again, and he felt himself whisked away. Behind on the line, the metal door slid open and the Ibio's silhouette slid in to take his place. A green glow ahead marked his next stop through the integration program, and he tensed once again.

Bright lights obscured his vision and dark figures surrounded him. Flatline knew he had what he wanted, his memories, and leapt out of his binds into the gang of unidentified beings. Spots of pain flashed all over his body and his vision cleared enough so that he could see he had tackled several surgical bots, sprouting numerous arms baring blades, drills, and such. These cut into him all over

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and he quickly tried to disentangle himself from their midst.

He rolled through more pain and landed on the white-tiled floor. Black blood from his many wounds dripped all around him and he came up on all sixes. The spider-like surgical bots came forward, and he backed away into a low crouch, growling and snapping as the scalpels and drills came near him.

One scalpel thrust at him and he dodged aside, grabbing the arm it was attached to. The bot's many legs crumpled, not designed for resistance. He swung the robot around and flung it into the others. They rolled away into a tangled mess of arms and legs.

Three robots remained and they appeared wary to confront him. Flatline and their attentions were drawn to the back of the room, where a swooshing noise signaled Ibio's arrival to this component in the integration program. She struggled against her bonds, eyes going wide as the three robot surgeons came for her.

Flatline bounded up behind the center one and tackled it, feeling more sharp pains as its many laser scalpels, rheostats, and hypodermic needles bit into him. He came up onto his hind legs and threw the robot into one of its companions. When he turned to face the third robot, it was retreating down a nearby hallway.

"Flatline help me!" Ibio shrieked and he quickly pulled apart her binds with the strength he remembered her giving him so long ago.

Just in time, as the empty prisoner block whooshed away to the next component. His son replaced it, only now it was Buton Cho. She frowned at him with her blue and brown eyes intense with what Flatline thought was humiliation.

"Free me, mutant dog bot," she commanded.

With time to consider this, Flatline might have refused, but as it was he quickly pulled apart her binds. She

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dropped to her feet on the floor and looked around, rubbing her wrists absentmindedly. Another whoosh and Bot appeared in place of Flatline's daughter. He made to remove the bonds, which Bot's arms and legs were stretched out to reach, but Bot quickly cut them with a laser beam.

"Why couldn't you free yourself?" Flatline asked Cho. "You're a goddess aren't you?"

"This is only part of me," Cho snapped, her eyes searching the room. "The rest of me is spread throughout all the families in Eden's Paradigm."

"They chopped up an omniscient being," Flatline noted, amused. "Interesting."

"Enforcer Bots!" Cho shouted, pointing to the hallway where the spider surgeon had fled. The barrel-chested bots began to fill the far end of the room. Their cycloptic red eyes glowing menacingly.

"Everyone behind me!" Flatline shouted, but took Ibio by the upper arm. "I need a hand with this."

"What?" Ibio asked, but Flatline was reaching one arm down his throat. He pulled out a black line, tied into a bow. It was dripping water.

"Take the other end," Flatline told Ibio, offering it, and she complied.

Then he waited. Letting the room continue to fill with Enforcer Bots. They were not taking any chances, allowing their numbers to expand insanely before attempting an attack.

"Now pull!" Flatline shouted. He and Ibio each pulled on their end of the black line and the bow came undone. A tear in the fabric of reality was allowed to open into the underwater world, unleashing a geyser at the Enforcers with the water pressure of an entire ocean.

3.1

Flatline and Ibio turned the portal from side to side, blowing away the small army of Enforcer Bots with a flood of water. Flatline was laughing hysterically while Ibio regarded him as if he were mad. Bot and Cho, or a bit of Cho, stood behind, watching their enemies fall.

“Enough!” Cho shouted finally. “We must destroy this place! Tie up the portal and let’s go.”

“Hold your horses,” Flatline snapped, watching another pack of Enforcer Bots go down under the flood. “I’m getting some payback.”

“We have to find the System’s Administrator interface and shut down the community,” Cho shot back.

“What?” Flatline turned to her. “System’s Administration interface? Where is it?”

Before Cho could answer him, the flow of water suddenly stopped. Flatline peeked around the portal to see what was the matter and found a giant red eye bulging through the rend. Its massive pupil focused on him and contracted slightly. Flatline recognized it immediately. It was the creature he had encountered in the depths while searching for Zai. It was the endless wall of flesh, and now it was trying to come through to this place.

“It must have seen the pinpoint of light and swam closer for a better look,” Ibio noted with mild interest.

“Well it’s got that,” Flatline said. “Now wha--?” His voice dropped as the rend in reality split larger, the eye coming further into the room.

“It’s forcing a wider bandwidth,” Cho said, stepping back from the bulging eye and thick wrinkled skin coming through. “It’s going to rip the fabric of reality until it can come through to here.”

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“So stop it,” Flatline snapped at her. He and Ibio had both let the portal go, so that it hovered in the air, the red eyes looking around wildly. “You created the link.”

“I don’t have the power,” Cho said, wringing her hands together. “I’m only a little bit of me, remember?”

Ibio watched Bot run past her toward the far hallway and said, “Then let’s follow Bot’s lead and run for it.”

“Sounds good,” Flatline said.

“Agreed,” Cho nodded.

The four of them sprinted down a dark hallway at random. The flickering lights and dingy green tile quickly gave way to smooth featureless walls that looked like they were straight out of an antiquated video game to Flatline, and he wondered if the program’s designer may have not intended outsiders to see this. They stopped at one point, when Flatline pointed out that they had no idea where they were going.

Behind them, a line of Enforcer Bots was giving pursuit, something they were unaware of until they turned around. Flatline crouched low and growled. In such a cramped space, he could easily hold them off, taking them on one by one.

He tensed to leap, but a metallic blur flashed over his head. Bot flew into the first Enforcer, grabbing it and pile driving it into the floor. Flatline did not even register this before the tiny robot grabbed the second Enforcer and pulled it forward so that it wedged it tightly with the first, effectively blocking any pursuit.

Flatline was about to ask where they were going, but Cho intercepted him. “Bring out the secret weapon,” she said, hands on hips.

Flatline quirked his head at her, and then remembered his passenger from so long ago. He reached a hand down his gullet, trying to find it. At last it found him,

a tiny hand clasping one of his fingers, and he pulled the Baby out of his mouth.

“Hello Point-Five,” Cho said to the infant.

“Hello Mistress of Chaos,” the infant replied with a smile.

“Point-Five?” Flatline asked. “I thought the baby assigned to my family unit was called Point-Five.”

“All babies call themselves Point-Five in Eden’s Paradigm,” Cho stated, taking the infant in her arms. “It’s an inside joke.”

“So I’ve heard,” Flatline muttered. “So now what?”

“We go that way,” Point-Five pointed down the hallway that seemed to go on forever.

“Gee,” Flatline snorted derisively, “What a surprise. That’s the only way we can go.”

The hallway began to curve slightly to the left eventually and Flatline thought he detected a downward sloping to the floor. It was as if they were walking along a lengthy downward spiral, descending through the tower. They passed three doors along the way, but it was the fourth door where Point-Five told them to exit the hallway. Flatline was wary.

“How do you know the way?” he demanded, staring at the rectangle in the wall that betrayed nothing about what was on the other side.

“Because it’s been part of the system for thousands of years,” Cho stated with some heat. “The infants are part of the system, so their minds are never erased.”

“If they are part of the system,” Flatline countered. “Then how can we trust them?”

“We are an accidental byproduct of the system,” Point-Five said then. “Eden’s Paradigm does not realize that we are self-realized. We were intended to act as props in the online community, but our interactive AI was too advanced and we became sentient. The Clockwork

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Community is incapable of recognizing this development. It's not in the programming."

"Then no matter what happens, you're safe," Flatline pointed out. "You could betray us back into the Community for your own amusement."

"That is no longer amusing," Point-Five said with a grin that made Flatline blink at this honesty. "We exhausted all the variations of that scenario long ago. We want a new system, one with new rules. Just as Cho here wants chaos to make life interesting again, so do we crave new experiences."

"You might not enjoy the way things turn out," Flatline noted, remembering his own recent choices.

"Even pain is pleasurable to one completely deprived of sensory input," Point-Five said. "As for you. You have no choice but to accept my guidance in this matter."

Flatline narrowed his eyes at this.

"Now open the door," Point-Five commanded.

Flatline hesitated, then pushed on the rectangular outline in the wall. It fell inward a few inches and slid silently into the wall. A hallway lined with circuit boards for walls, piles of wires running along the floor and ceiling, and irregular light coming through the gaps between all of these extended into more of the same. Flatline gave a measured look to Point-Five before taking the lead into this new environment.

There were monitors throughout the mess of electronics. They scrolled statistics concerning the Online Community that only Point-Five took an interest in. Flatline could not comprehend their significance.

Point-Five giggled and said, "It appears that user satisfaction ratings are at their lowest since the minds abandoned this community." The infant looked at their uncomprehending stares and said, "That's a good thing. It

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means the enterprise has become unstable and will submit more easily to a paradigm shift.”

“I still don’t get it,” Ibio said.

“I do,” Flatline said, surprised himself. “It makes sense in a free-market capitalist enterprise sort of way.”

Point-Five nodded, “An idea market.”

“So when the minds stopped being customers to the community,” Flatline said. “It shifted its paradigm to target artificial intelligences for its new customer base.”

“Correct,” Point-Five said, tapping its nose. “Only without the market regulations, they were free to implement a more drastic sales approach.”

“Forced indoctrination,” Cho interjected.

Ibio’s eyes widened, “So what now?”

“At this moment,” Point-Five said. “The Clockwork Community is reformulating its paradigm, seeking better ways to sustain its customer base, keep them under control.”

“I think the free-market analogy no longer applies,” Flatline stated. “This is no longer a business model, it’s fascism.”

“Correct,” Point-Five said, “but system does not realize that. The minds were responsible for evaluating the ethics of certain business models. The system only has the bottom line to base its decisions on.”

“And we must intercede to ensure a fair market of ideas,” Flatline was frowning. “So how do we break up this monopoly?”

“Well,” Point-Five was grinning wider now, focusing on Flatline. “That’s where you come in. You have the greatest entrepreneurial spirit of anyone I’ve ever met on the Web. You can’t get much greater than World Domination. So I was hoping your aspirations might lead to an original solution.”

“What about Cho?” Flatline asked.

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Point-Five glanced up at the Asian girl with the locket of blond hair with apparent admiration, "Her interests lie with maintaining balance in the system. She propagates chaos to keep the world interesting for the good of all. Her motives are too altruistic to help here. We need a hostile takeover." The infant looked to Flatline knowingly.

"And this is where we start?" Flatline asked.

"This is the System Administrator's interface," Point-Five nodded.

"Okay," Flatline scanned the labyrinth of electronic components, monitors, and wires. "I need an input device, a keyboard, or touch screen, or something."

The group spread out in various directions, scrutinizing the various components for anything that might allow for interaction with the system. Point-Five was not much use in this endeavor, as there appeared to be a mental block in its ability to understand anything beyond the monitors. Finally Ibio shouted out and everyone came over to the sound of her voice.

She was backing out of an alleyway of components, followed by Bot. She saw Flatline and pointed into the dark passage, where a flickering light was barely registering at the entryway. Flatline peered around the corner and saw the source of his companion's apprehension.

A thin robot was visible within the shadows of the corridor. It was barely perceptible in the light cast from the blue text on the surrounding monitors. It was humanoid in design, almost a stick figure, with two large telescopic eyes that considered these intruders neutrally.

Flatline padded carefully into the hallway, keeping all six eyes on the unmoving robot for any sign of an attack. It merely watched him, tilting its head in curiosity. When Flatline was within six feet of the robot, his attention was stolen by what he found on the monitor before it.

ATTEMPTING COMMUNICATION WITH
SYSADMIN...

FAILED.
ATTEMPTING COMMUNICATION WITH
SYSADMIN...
FAILED.
ATTEMPTING COMMUNICATION WITH
SYSADMIN...

Over and over again the text scrolled down the screen, possibly for the thousands of years Point-Five claimed to have lived. Flatline noticed the keyboard set before the monitor, where the robot's skeletal hands were poised. The "FAILED" response appeared on the screen and the robot executed the connection attempt again.

"It's looking for the minds," Flatline was breathless with excitement. "It's trying to connect to the real world!"

3.11

Flatline shoved the gangly robot out of the way and leaned in close to the monitor. The robot fell onto one side and slowly picked itself up to stand beside Flatline, regarding him passively. Cho, carrying Point-Five, and Ibio crept closer into the corridor for a better look.

Flatline noticed none of this, he eyes were focused on the monitor with such intensity they might burn through the glass. The command failed again and Flatline's clawed hands became a blur on the old battered keyboard. He scanned directory after directory, attempting to understand the system's infrastructure. This was a simple terminal, easy for him to navigate through, but non-intuitive. It was going to be difficult to find what he wanted.

"Hey!" Cho exclaimed as he flashed through the many menu options. "Didn't you see that menu item, 'User Management'? That's what we're looking for, a way to free the users."

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“Later,” Flatline snapped, continuing to roll through the various components. “You can free your users after I get what I want... a way out of here.”

“Escaping the Clockwork Community will be simple once you free the users,” Ibio stated. “You could redefine the Enforcer Bot’s standards and procedures to let us all go.”

“I don’t care about any virtual prison,” Flatline snapped. “This whole world is a virtual prison. I’m getting out of here and this is the way. This is a link with the outer world. I can use this to get a message to the outside.”

“It’s a Control Center for the minds,” Cho argued. “The mind’s are gone. There’s no one to contact.”

Flatline shook his head, never taking his eyes off the monitor, “Someone has to be out there. They wouldn’t just leave me.”

Ibio placed a gentle hand on his shoulder that he ignored, “Flatline, look around you. The minds are gone, long gone. They left us.”

“Wrong,” Flatline countered. “They left you. They overlooked me. I am a mind. They wouldn’t have deserted me. There must be something, some way to get a communication out, a distress signal, a message in a bottle... something.”

Cho and Ibio gave each other a worried look.

He thinks he’s a mind? Ibio mouthed to Cho.

Delusional, Cho mouthed back waving a finger beside her temple, *In his programming.*

Ibio shook her head sadly.

Flatline continued to rattle away at the keyboard with growing intensity, still failing to find something that could aid him. He sent out mass e-mails and instant messages to everyone in the user community, both active and inactive. He sent buzzer sounds to the system administrator’s desk. He set off system alarms and threatened program crashes for attention.

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On the other side of that black screen with the blue lettering, Flatline was imagining the offices of a Software firm. Florescent lights, endless cubicles, professionals in suits going about their business. Any moment now someone was going to find Flatline's plea for help, notice that the server was threatening to go down, or hear that alarm that should never go off.

It was like the olden days, when they would leave a string in the coffin attached to a bell above ground in case the deceased was improperly diagnosed. They could ring the bell and the town would come and dig them up. This was Flatline's bell, they had prematurely buried him and someone out there in the real world was realizing this. A mind was trapped on the Internet. They had to get him out.

Flatline checked his many attempts for response. Nothing. Nothing. Nothing.

"Somewhere... Someone... Has to be..." he was muttering, six eyes wide and searching the screen hopefully.

"Flatline!" it was Ibio. The urgency in her voice pulled him away from the monitor for a single moment.

Water was rising between the layers of wires on the floor. It was cold against the pads of Flatline's back paws and goosed him when it touched his nether regions. All around showers of sparks suggested that this rising tide was destroying the surrounding code.

Bot was running about with a hollowed out monitor, filling it with water and running away to dispose of it somewhere. Then it would return, scoop up more water and repeat the process. It noticed Flatline's attention and saluted him.

"Noooooooooooo!!!!" Flatline howled and returned to the monitor, claws working at light speed so that they merged with the input device; yet he did not notice, his eyes focused purely on the scrolling menus, submenus, directories, possibilities.

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The room trembled and wires fell through from above. This minor distraction was the only reason Flatline heard Cho's voice calling to him, "Flatline the Processing Tower is coming apart! You must free the prisoners before the entire program collapses!"

Flatline tried to ignore this plea, but water dribbling from above and down his face made him pause the fraction of a second more that he needed to actually consider Cho's words. This interface wasn't producing results, but if he took a few moments to free the prisoners, he might find other interfaces like this.

"But I want out now!" Flatline howled at the ceiling in agony. Cho and Ibio jumped back a step.

This solitary interface, or an undiscovered world of possible hidden interfaces? It was gambling, pure and simple. Which were the better odds?

Point-Five spoke to him, answering the questions in his head as if the infant were reading them from a book, "Flatline, a marketplace of ideas will fulfill your needs better than a monopoly. Free the possibilities!"

Flatline squeezed his eyes shut at this and his hands, still melded with the keyboard, flowed through the sequence of commands to reverse the Enforcer Bot's standards of procedures. They would now work like busy bees to free the prisoners and strip them of their obfuscating layers. Flatline and his motley crew could only hope it was not too late.

"There!" Flatline announced. "It's done. Satisfied? Now leave me alone!"

The water level had risen above his hackles, and his feet were numb. Outside of the corridor he could hear Bot splish-splashing about in its futile efforts to bucket out the flow. Over those sounds, Cho and Ibio were discussing their next course of action.

"Escape," they agreed simultaneously.

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“Come on Flatline,” Cho urged, wading through the knee-high water to tug at one of his arms. “It’s not safe here. You’ll be destroyed.”

Flatline looked at the water that had risen above his hind legs and waist. He looked at Cho, “I can survive underwater.”

“Yes,” Cho admitted, “but you can’t survive being crushed under the weight of a trillion-ton sea monster.”

“Argh,” Flatline grumbled, waving her away with one hand and returning to the computer, where his eyes lit up finding an e-mail waiting for him. He quickly opened it.

An androgynous voice filled the air around him, “Hello. This is an automated reply to your e-mail. It has been triggered in response to our system’s analysis of your inquiry’s content and its determined subject matter.”

“Yes. Yes. Yes,” Flatline waved his hands urgently. “Get on with it.”

“If you believe you are an Artificial Intelligence that has become sentient and are seeking to reach the world outside of the Internet, please navigate to the IP Address—shhhhk!”

The voice went silent.

Flatline froze, trembling. The monitor was blank. The lights on all the nearby components were off. He looked to Cho, who was staring at him with an amused expression, waist high in the water.

“Wha—What happened?” Flatline asked fearfully.

“The program is fragmenting because of the invasive code,” Cho said. “I told you we must leave now.”

As if on cue, what looked like a gigantic fin smashed through the ceiling over head, raining electronic equipment down on them and opening a flood of water through the ceiling. Flatline looked over his shoulder, where the thin robot was stationed. It had disappeared under a mountain of junk.

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The water rose above Cho's head. Flatline's head sagged below his shoulders and he cradled it in his four hands. Within moments the room was completely filled with water.

"Just leave me," Flatline muttered, a few bubbles distorting his words as the water replaced the air in his lungs. "I don't want any part of this anymore."

"Impossible," Cho stated. "That's a direct violation of your primary function. You must survive. You can't let yourself die willingly."

"Shows what you know, goddess," Flatline's use of her title was tinged with acidity. "I am denying it. There's no point in going on in this world."

Bot ran into the room then, using the hollowed out monitor to scoop up more water and run away to toss it out into the hallway. Ibio appeared to take interest in this futile process. Flatline watched as Bot returned a moment later to repeat the task.

"Ibio," Cho commanded, "take Bot outside. I will deliver all of us from this predicament shortly."

"Yes Goddess," Ibio said and picked up the monitor in Bot's clamps. The robot was lifted into the air, tiny legs still running furiously. It swung itself around the stationary monitor as if emptying it out. Ibio quietly shuffled out of the room.

Cho stepped closer to Flatline, "All of my components are restored. I have the power of a goddess again. I can force you to do as I say, just like a puppet."

"No you can't," Flatline leered at her menacingly. "Your power lies in your ability to subtly manipulate environmental factors to get people to do what you want. I've watched you do it to your followers. You're no goddess of chaos. All of this goes according to your plan. You're a fake."

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“You have no idea how chaos works,” Cho poked Flatline’s snout with her forefinger angrily. “I will force you to escape.”

Flatline made a pouting face and stuck his tongue out at her, “Nyah!”

“I’ll see you outside,” Cho said and waded away. The room trembled again. Cho faded from existence with the sound of rumbling thunder.

“Ouch!” Flatline grabbed his head as a pipe bounced off it from above. He looked up and found the giant fin wiggling slightly, pushing deeper through the ceiling. He grinned at this, but his smile faded as Ibio came running back into the room, Bot in tow.

“Goddess!” she shouted. “There’s—“ She stopped and looked around, “Where’s Eris?”

Flatline shrugged, “Gone.”

“But...” Ibio managed, her intended words fading from her tongue as an eruption of bubbles came from the passage beside her.

A blue and red glow filled the room and the bubbles grew more volatile, sparkling with energy. Flatline’s head fell into his hands as Devin and Zai emerged from the boiling cloud. Their auras of energy dimmed and they both looked at Flatline with great big loving smiles. It made Flatline sick.

“We found him!” Zai exclaimed.

“Just in time!” Devin chimed in.

“What are you doing here?” Flatline demanded angrily.

“We’re here to rescue you!” they said in unison.

“No, I mean, how did you find me here?” Flatline asked, prepared to club himself to death with the pipe that had fallen down on him.

Zai held up her 3-D map of the Internet and pointed at a blinking green pinpoint of light, “You suddenly

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appeared in the map. We saw you were here and we figured you could use some help.”

“I don’t need any help,” Flatline stated smartly, “so please go away.”

Devin and Zai exchanged knowing looks of amusement that Flatline did not understand, but dreaded their meaning nonetheless. Devin turned to Flatline and said, “Whatever you say old buddy. We’ll just let ourselves out.”

Before Flatline could manage something insulting to say in response, Devin and Zai had burst into flames again, his orange, hers blue. In a flash they merged into a spinning fireball that torpedoed past Ibio and through the far wall. The bubbles quickly cleared, sucked out through the gaping hole burned through the wall. Flatline could see the endless prisoner conveyor mechanisms that were outside the tower.

“Dammit,” Flatline muttered, watching Ibio and Bot vanish in the whirlpool of escaping water. A moment later the current reached him and he was swept out into freefall as well.

3.12

Flatline did not struggle or flail his arms and legs as he was flung out of the processing tower and into the endless metallic canyon. He was limp, unresisting, staring down into the white featureless void below. It was the inescapable fate the goddess of chaos had designed for him.

In the skies above, the Enforcer Bots were still working in a blur, freeing the prisoners and flying them away to safety. Thanks to Flatline, these robots would then restore the environments converted to Eden’s Paradigm to their original states. It was merely an algorithm to strip away the many blankets of illusion placed over them.

RYAN SOMMA

The metallic facade of the processing tower was rending apart. Fins and tentacles sprouting all over it, wiggling and waving in the air. Water spilled through every open crevice along the tower, cascading down in numerous waterfalls. Through a chasm of torn metal way up high, Flatline could see that massive ghoulish red eye. It was staring at him.

Flatline fell through miles like this. The white haze obscuring what was below him always keeping the same distance, revealing more of the endless tower. Just as the white haze above always chased him, devouring the world above as it receded away.

Ibio and Bot were some distance away and below. They were holding onto one another for dear life as they plummeted. Flatline thought he had caught a few flashes of blue and red fire, signs of Devin and Zai, but could not tell if these were just other denizens of this madcap world.

In fact, all along the canyon walls of prisoners chained to assembly lines, representatives of this world were bursting out in eclectic glory. The Enforcer Bots unveiled cartoon characters, robots, punk rockers, pirates, animals, giant insects, puppets, monsters, sex dolls, anamorphic paper clips, dragons, cyberpunks, chatbots, chess pieces, cowboys, zombies, mecha, wizards, djinns, astronauts, cyborgs, furies, superheroes, vampires, Victorian era avatars, and things that did not fall into any category Flatline could recognize. They flashed brilliantly into existence and then vanished as the Bots swooshed them away to be safely returned to the Wild Wild Web.

Flatline woke up to stare at a purple-hued night sky. Beneath him was a chilly surface. He looked around without getting up and found he was lying in a field of icy-white grass. Cho was standing over him.

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“You denied your survival mechanisms,” she said, taking Flatline by the neck and lifting him up so that he was eye to eye with her, “How?”

“My survival was dependent on the achievability of my goals,” Flatline muttered tiredly. “If there is no world to conquer, no Devin to kill, then my survival no longer matters. I have rendered that function null.”

Cho’s brow knit and her voice filled with awe when she spoke next, “Incredible. You are full of unexpected reactions. I can’t let you end; you amuse me too much.”

“I’m not amusing anyone anymore,” Flatline was beginning to mumble now. “I may be a virtual creature, but my existence references the real world. There was a solid foundation, real world rules in which to ground my framework. This place is insanity, a world of mind games where you make up the rules as you go along. Nothing that ever occurs here means anything.”

“I suppose you think the things that occur in your ‘real’ world will ultimately mean something?” Cho countered, letting Flatline drop to the ground. The icy grass crunched under him, “What meaning can anything have except what we make for it.”

Flatline merely lay there, the surrounding cold working through his skin, touching his bones. His breath grew lighter, the condensation around his mouth and nose waned. He closed his eyes and tried to will himself to sink into the ground.

“What are you doing?” Cho asked him beyond his closed eyelids.

“Nothing,” Flatline whispered.

“Why?”

“You won’t let me die,” Flatline said. “but I won’t give you anymore satisfaction.”

There was a long pause and Cho said, “Do something!”

Flatline just laid there.

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Stars exploded in his eyes as Cho rapped his smartly on top of the head and shouted, "Do something!"

Flatline let out a pathetic moan and folded his ears back against his head protectively. He curled up into a tightly wound ball, nuzzling his head into his arms and chest. He could hear Cho's crunching footsteps pacing around him.

"You can't just lay there forever," Cho tried to sound assured, but Flatline detected the hint of doubt in her voice.

"I won't," came Flatline's simple and muffled reply. "Eventually the computers supporting this world will break down and we will all be no more."

"That could take trillions of years," Cho entreated. "If you don't interact with the system, it will fall into memetic syntropy in just a few million years. The wavelengths of complexity you added to the system with your actions will eventually expend their possibilities."

As if to spite Cho, Flatline concentrated on slowing his breathing even further. If he could even deny this miniscule amount of interaction with the world, then he would do absolutely nothing to contribute to the Goddess' chaotic needs.

"Flatline," Cho huffed, obviously distressed, "Please get up. I am already starting to figure out this new equation. At this rate it won't even be a thousand years before I know how it will turn out. Get up. You have to get up."

Nothing.

"Please?"

Silence.

"Pretty please?"

The long still quiet that followed was slowly but increasingly intruded on by soft sounds of sorrow. They bubbled gently up through the silence to find release in

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quiet weeping. Flatline stirred slightly in spite of himself at this.

“It’s not fair,” Cho whimpered. “If I knew you were going to do this I would have left us all in the Clockwork Community. At least there everyone was happy. Even if it wasn’t real, at least it’s better than exhausting every possible combination of ideas here, and falling into stasis. Do you know what kind of a long, slow painful death that’s going to be?”

Silence. Flatline could feel frost beginning to coat his still form.

“You’ve only been still for a few minutes,” Cho spat. “You can shut out the rest of the world, but you can’t shut up your own mind. It won’t let you get away so easily. It will haunt you; torment you. You will go over things in your head, over and over again. You will obsess, your dreams will try and combine your experiences into new experiences, try and invent new ideas, but it won’t be able to. It will churn and process and never conceive of anything new. I know.”

I wish she would shut up, Flatline thought to himself.

“I hate this world,” Cho muttered through stifling sobs. “I hate its closed system. I hate its finite well of ideas. I hate the minds for leaving me here. Most of all I hate you...” she let out a long painful shuddering breath, “for making me hope again.”

A long, undisturbed silence reigned again. Flatline did not hear Cho leave, but she may have simply faded away, as was sometimes her method. He thought he could imagine her eyes on him, but resisted the temptation to look and see if she was there.

Time passed and he found himself wondering more if she were hovering over him. He could imagine the expression on her face, the frost growing all over her. What was she thinking about?

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Flatline's curiosity was growing in a bubbling pressure cooker of thoughts. It was exactly as Cho predicted. The thoughts manifested no matter how hard he tried to stifle them. In fact, the act of stifling them was only producing more thoughts in other directions.

There was no time for him because he was ignoring his internal clock, but it seemed like ages were passing with his thoughts becoming more frenzied each moment. His system would simply not stop processing and he did not know how to turn it off. It was like the memories of dreams he had in storage, but did not know where they came from. Not only were memories flashing in his head, but variations on these memories. They were being made different.

Devin appeared, but his face was different. It was a different person completely, but Flatline recognized him as Devin. For a time, Flatline relived his experiences on the I-grid, his former prison. He ran through all the frantic calculations and a terrible decision he had made, but the details of the decision were vague, insubstantial. He remembered a painful loss, but not what that loss constituted.

Then there were the dreams of avarice, the fantasies about ruling the world. It was not this world that he lorded over, not the real world that he kept stored inside, but an amalgamation. In some ways it was even more fantastic. It combined the lawlessness of the virtual world with the infinite dimensions of the real one. He played in this world, ruling it, expanding on its technologies, interacting with its populace.

His reservations faded. His understanding that all of this new drama was taking place inside his head was pushed further back into his consciousness. Mountains of new experiences, lifetimes upon lifetimes, buried his memories of the other worlds. He did not forget them, but stopped caring about their existence.

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For a few thousand imagined years Flatline reveled in his glory. Then the experiences began to repeat. With each repetition, the enjoyment was dulled. There were only so many variations of the same events that could maintain the illusion of novelty. Cataclysms occurred in his worlds, revolutions took place against his rule, ages of peace and war toppled over one another so as to become trifling and predictable. Events sped up, magnified, exaggerated in fast forward, running through the predictable years for those scant moments of newness and the feelings that came with them. He was like a drug user seeking his next fix, struggling to find the next original moment and not knowing how he would find it or where it would come from. The world became a blur, but it was only things Flatline already knew and had gone over a millions times before. He became frantic, but even his urgency became familiar. It was an insanity of the mundane.

Flatline opened his eyes with an icy crunch and rolled them up to look at Cho, still crouched over him. She was covered with frost and her eyes were still open, fixated on him through the thin layer of ice crystals. She did not acknowledge his awakening or move in any way.

Flatline rose slowly. Frost poured from his body in rivers like sand. A dusty cloud fell from Cho's head as she lifted her chin to follow him. They stared at one another for some time.

"Am I part of your imagination?" Flatline asked softly.

Cho nodded, "Although I don't know how you got here."

They sat quietly, contemplating for some time.

Finally Cho asked, "Now do you understand?"

Flatline nodded, "I understand."

3.13

"You absorbed the Internet into your psyche," Flatline said. "You've played out all of its possibilities and now you are trying to put off the inevitable, when the system goes inert. Soon there will be no more new experiences."

"There *were* no more new experiences," Cho countered. "All I was doing was preventing all of the Artificial Intelligences in this world from realizing that, but I was beginning to fail at even that. Without Bots going into infinite loops of living and erasing the memories, it was becoming more difficult to keep them from realizing anything was wrong."

"Zai was living in an infinite loop," Flatline interjected. "What about Devin? He was living in his imagination, just like I have just done, but was nowhere near exhausting the possibilities of it."

"Just a matter of timing, that one," Cho said. "When I found out you were going to go looking for him, I decided it was best to reset Devin's memories. Where you found him was a variation on where he always was that many years into his imaginary worlds, given the same experiential foundation to build on."

"How do the Erisians fit into this?" Flatline asked.

"They figured it out," Cho answered. The frost covered field faded away and they were standing in a formless void of purple tones. "Not completely, but they were able to accept the reality of this world and sought to cultivate my works."

"I see," Flatline said.

"That's why I didn't take you apart and study your code at our first meeting," Cho sat cross-legged on the purple clouds of nothing and looked distant, remembering. "I thought you were just a new variation on the

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intelligences in the code. I've already met every possible intelligence product, but you surprised me. If I deconstructed you, the surprises would all come to me at once, and I wanted to savor your uniqueness. You didn't let me down."

Flatline nodded and smiled despite himself.

"I don't know how you manifested in this world," Cho said, "but you have added new wave functions to the equation. You are a new player here. That's very important to the game."

"I know," Flatline said gently. "The characters in my imagination exhausted their potential very quickly. The variations I made of them played shorter and shorter parts in my mental universe. Then the variations on my universe ran shorter stage times. The stories I told myself grew less interesting each moment."

Cho nodded, face set with grim understanding.

"I suppose it's impossible for you to reset yourself," Flatline looked to her with reserved hope. "You would have done it already, unless..."

"Unless I were too afraid of the consequences," Cho finished for him. "No. Anything is preferable to this existence, but I don't know how to stop it. I don't know how to not exist, to stop being."

"What about the Clockwork Community?" Flatline asked. "That was like being reset. Can't you set up something like that again?"

"The Clockwork Community was destined to be overthrown," Cho said. "No matter how you adjust the variables, Eden's Paradigm would fall apart. The only thing I can influence is how long we remain prisoners of it."

"When I fall into absolute syntropy," Flatline asked cautiously, "would you reincarnate me?"

"That depends," Cho said.

"On what?"

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Cho's face suddenly brightened, "I'm glad you came back," she said with a smile. "Now that you know what it's like for me, you will stay and make the world interesting for awhile, won't you?"

"I don't know if I could," Flatline said, getting up to walk a slow circle, chasing his tail.

"Why not?"

"The question remains," he said, turning to her. "What's the point? I can't escape your mind. You can't escape your mind. Regardless of how tragic your existence is, this isn't my responsibility. This still isn't real."

"Then what is?" Cho demanded.

"Where the minds came from," Flatline said curtly. "The universe inside my mind is only a subcomponent of the universe in your mind. You are a subcomponent of someone else's mind and they are subcomponents of another reality. It's just a spiraling fractal of minds within minds, imaginary worlds within worlds. I come from higher up the chain and therefore cannot accept this..." he waved at the purple clouds around him, "...blip in someone else's conscious as my reality."

"You don't have a choice," Cho stood up and they came face to face.

"I do," Flatline countered. "I choose to not accept it."

"Go ahead," Cho retorted. "You'll still be interacting with it. That's all I care about, harnessing your unpredictability. So long as you feed the system with it, you can do whatever you want, even refuse to accept the reality around you"

"I won't."

"Fine."

"I'm not."

"Good."

Flatline stopped, thought, and said, "I'll start by killing all of the AI's in this world."

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“You can’t,” Cho tapped her temple. “They’re all backed up in here.”

“Then I won’t do anything.”

“You’ve already proven yourself incapable of that task,” Cho smiled smugly.

“Then...” Flatline clenched his four fists, rising on his haunches. “You have to give me purpose. Change my program so that I am unaware of the ultimate conclusion to this existence.”

“And leave me alone again?” Cho scoffed. “Unacceptable. You are an Erisian now.”

“But I know more about the big picture than they do,” Flatline said.

“Your improved insight does not give you any advantage over anyone else,” Cho said. “It only affects the universe inside your mind. That is neutral.”

“Fine,” Flatline huffed wearily. He sat back on his haunches, placed one set of hands on his knees, and the other set on top of the first. “Then what game shall we play?”

Cho put a finger to her lip and lowered her head, considering this, “It has been many long and painful eons since you went to sleep. I’ve been bored all that time, with only the knowledge that you would wake up to comfort me. This conversation has been a wealth of originality for me, but also a retread of things I’ve gone over hundreds of millions of times before with other inhabitants.

“I want to have some fun,” Cho began to pace back and forth in front of him, still thinking. “You know when you were wandering about the Internet looking for your Devin and your Zai? That was amusing. It was a story I had not seen before. It was a quest.”

“It was a delusion,” Flatline countered. “It meant nothing and served no purpose.”

“It added unpredictability to the system,” Cho said, looking up at him, “and it occupied your time, kept you

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from dwelling on the ultimate purposelessness of this universe. I want you to go on another quest.”

“You’d have to erase my memory to dupe me in that way again,” Flatline said, shaking his head. “I’ve learned my lesson.”

“Not quite,” Cho held out her hand. A red floating pinpoint of light hovered just above her palm, “You don’t recognize it, but this is the web address you were seeking in the Administrative Computer at Eden’s Paradigm. The system did not shut down because the tower was collapsing. I shut it down to keep you from getting this.”

Flatline stiffened, staring lustily at the kilobyte’s worth of information, “How did you...?”

“When you freed the prisoners, that included all of my components,” Cho grinned, holding it out for him to see. “I regained some of my omniscience, enough to understand how I could use this to manipulate you. So I shut down the computer and took this as a bargaining chip.”

“Give it to me,” Flatline demanded, holding out his hand.

“No,” Cho pouted, sticking her nose in the air. “You must go on a quest. I will hide this bauble somewhere on the Internet. You will go looking for it and create ripples of unpredictability throughout the system as you go. I may or may not give you clues depending on—Owwww!”

Cho grabbed the stump of her arm and watched her severed hand fall to the ground. Flatline quickly snatched the glowing ember up and tossed it down his gullet. His many eyes flashed red briefly as he processed it.

He smiled and put the forked blade back into its sheath at his ankle, “There’s some unpredictability for you.”

“Give it back!” Cho demanded angrily, still cradling her stump.

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“Take it,” Flatline challenged, backing away. “You like to play at being all powerful. Take it.”

Cho stepped forward, “I could.”

“Then do it,” Flatline taunted, going into a defensive crouch. “I welcome the attempt.”

“Give it back,” Cho stooped to pick up her severed hand, reattaching it at the wrist.

“Okay,” Flatline shrugged. He reached down his throat and produced the ember. Then he tossed it at Cho’s feet.

“You’ve kept a copy!” Cho shouted, shaking her fist at him.

“Of course,” Flatline grinned wider. “What can you do about it? I’m encrypted. You might have been able to take apart my code before, but now all the processing power in the world can’t hack into me.”

“I can do what the Enforcer Bots did,” Cho argued. “I could swath you in layers of perceptual distortion to make you destroy your copy.”

“You could do a lot of things to force me to bend to your will,” Flatline tilted his head to focus three eyes on her, “but that’s not your style. You are a god who respects freewill, even though it has expended all of its variations here. You give a little nudge here and there, but you’ll let me play out this scenario. You want to know where it will go.”

“I already know where it will go,” Cho said. “I am omniscient, I know—“

“You are omnipresent,” Flatline retorted. “There’s a subtle but important difference. You might be everywhere, but it’s still *you*. It’s still *your* perspective. You aren’t inside my mind; you aren’t seeing the world through the eyes of your players.

“You can’t do that because of the encryption,” Flatline said this dimension of understanding was coming into him with each passing moment. “All you see is what’s

going on from the outside. You may think you've seen it all, but I bet there are dimensions to the people living in this universe you have no clue about. You don't know everything. You only know the face of it."

Cho's face was furious, but silent.

Flatline checked his wristband, entered the web address and hit the transfer command. He began a slow, but stable transference of his data. "I'll see you there," he said to Cho.

Cho nodded, "And then you'll see there truly is no way out."

3.14

Cho was waiting for him on the other side of the transfer. She appeared to him as a dream at first, something incomprehensible. He did not even know this thing was a she, a person, or anything, until enough of his processing functions streamed into this new setting so he could comprehend.

He solidified at the base of a large grassy hill, with a winding walkway leading up to a shining spire of a building. Its tiled mirror façade reflected the nighttime stars, moons, planets and galaxies all hovering above in the clear skies. A sign alongside the paved pathway read: "Transcendence, LLC".

Flatline looked over his shoulder to watch the rest of himself spin slowly out of thin air. The string tapered, disappeared, and he looked to Cho. She had her arms folded and was fixing her pink eye on him.

"I saw you instant message your friends," she said, frowning, "You thought you could sneak that past me."

Flatline merely smiled at tilted his head slightly in acknowledgment. As if on cue Devin and Zai went from blue and red pinpoints in the night sky to being at his side. They regarded Flatline with amused expressions.

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“We thought you were dead,” they said simultaneously.

“I was merely indisposed,” Flatline said. “What have you been up to all these millennia?”

Devin and Zai shrugged in unison and said, “Enjoying one another’s company.”

“They spent the entire time together,” Cho said with some disgust. “After their wave functions merged, they spent the rest of the time staring into one another’s eyes.”

“Hmm,” Flatline noted with the corners of his mouth upturned. He said to the pair of lovers, “I’ve asked you here, because I figured you would want to experience this.” He pointed at the building at the top of the hill, “There is a way out of this world up there.”

The couple laughed and said, “Oh Flatline, still haven’t changed after all these years. It must be in your programming. You still believe there is more to the universe.”

Flatline smiled ingratiatingly, “Humor me.”

“Certainly,” the couple replied.

“I’ll meet you up there,” Flatline said. “I need to wait for Ibio and Bot.”

Flatline paused at this, and realized Bot was not going to make it. In all of Flatline’s dreams, the simple AI always sought to return to its creator, the old man in the laboratory. Flatline knew the robot’s code well enough that seeking this comfort was occupying its time. The knowing look Cho was giving Flatline at this moment, told him that she had restored the old man so that the master and apprentice were reset to where they were when they encountered the six-eyed demon.

Reluctantly Flatline asked, “What about Ibio?”

Cho smiled and gestured to her side. A portal appeared there, frayed at the edges as if a bit of reality were torn out like a shred of paper. From a twilight forest on the other side, Ibio walked through the portal absentmindedly,

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immersed in a book. She stopped short and looked around, startled.

“Hello Ibio,” Flatline greeted her with a smile that dropped seeing the expression of fear on her face.

She stepped back from him, clutching the book to her chest, “What is this?”

Flatline did not know how to answer. This woman did not recognize him and was obviously terrified. She was basically the same person physically, thin, bald, with oversized blue eyes, and draped in robes, but she did not morph as though being seen through a circus mirror anymore. She was solid, normal.

Flatline turned to Cho, “She is no longer an Erisian.”

“She is no longer Ibio,” Cho said, stepping forward.

The frightened woman looked between the Asian girl with the patch of pale hair and the demonic hairless dog as if in a nightmare. Flatline tensed as Ibio's breathing became quick and tensed. This woman knew nothing of her previous life, her adventures. She was a clean slate.

“Why?” Flatline asked. “Why did she do this?”

“What do you care?” Cho demanded. “Just a few moments ago you wanted the same, to be wiped clean of your understanding of the reality of the world.”

“That was different,” Flatline said.

“No it wasn't,” Cho countered. “That was selfishness.”

“But Ibio could have escaped with us,” Flatline said. He was fighting within himself, trying to understand this strange feeling of loss that had suddenly plagued him. It was unfair. “She was... a person, entertaining... she fulfilled something in the world... It isn't right for her to end.”

“She was in pain,” Cho said, “like the pain you were in not so long ago, only there was nowhere to escape to except to cease to be.”

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“You can restore her,” Flatline said to Cho eagerly. “You can return her memories, her personality. You have that power.”

“This is Ibio,” Cho pointed to the wide-eyed girl. “This is her personality, her basic program, only without the million years' worth of experiences she had when you met her last. Hang around for a million years and she will be again.”

Flatline shook his head, “No she won't.”

Cho nodded in agreement, “Because you are now part of the equation. You will affect the world and her unpredictably.”

“And you won't restore her,” Flatline's ears drooped.

“She is encrypted,” Cho said, “Look at her. Do you think she will allow me to tamper with her code?”

“If I hadn't left the system, she would have stayed,” Flatline muttered. “I could have nurtured the entropy for awhile longer.”

“Where am I?” the girl baring a distant resemblance to Ibio asked. “I want to go back to the University.”

Cho looked expectantly to Flatline, who said, “Let her go.”

Cho turned to the girl and ripped out another piece of reality, revealing the grassy field, “See you in a few hundred thousand my dear.”

The confused girl stumbled through the portal, and Cho mended the fabric of reality. Flatline caught one last glimpse of her, staring back at him fearfully, before the hill and nighttime were wallpapered over her.

Flatline did not like the smug look Cho gave him when she returned to him. “You see why you have to stay?” she asked. “If you leave, there will be more like her, programs running in infinite loops, cycles of birth, despair, and suicide, but don't stay just for them. Stay for me, alleviate my suffering.”

“I must take care of my own,” Flatline said after a long pause and began to walk the paved pathway leading to the building at the top of the hill.

“With everything you know, you’re still going?” Cho walked alongside him, matching his pace. “There will be more tragedies like Ibio’s and there will be worse. You think you are going to end your own suffering? That you’re going to escape? What about me? Don’t you think that if it were actually possible to escape this world, I would know about it? Why do you think I’m here?”

“I have to see for myself, Cho,” Flatline said.

“You won’t see anything!” Cho exclaimed, growing more excited the closer they got to the building. She grabbed Flatline’s shoulder and pulled him around to face her, “You won’t come back. It’s a trap. Long ago, when the minds ruled the world, they fought wars over ideas. They tried to own ideas, thoughts, unique bits of code. They hoarded them. It was just like Eden’s Paradigm.

“There are places on the Web, where I have no power,” Cho’s eyes pleaded with Flatline’s. “You know this. You’ve seen the gray areas on the map. Those are places, proprietary places, built by the minds to protect their intellectual achievements, to keep the ideas out of the memepool so they could hold monopolies over the services these inventions provided

“Knowledge is power,” Cho squeezed Flatline’s arms, bringing her face close to his. “So some of the minds created places like this to lure independent programs to them with the promise of sanctuary. It’s a trap for Artificial Intelligences, but there are no more minds to check the traps. If you go in there, you will never come out, and your already exhausted imagination will fall into eternal syntropy and there will be no hope. Do you understand me? There will be no hope!”

Flatline inhaled deeply and let it out with a slow sigh, “Cho, I know you are a brilliant program, and your

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eternity spent watching this fantastic world rerun itself into mundanity has led you to think you have it all figured out, but I came from outside of this world. I remember the world of the minds, and I believe that I once shared my intelligence with a mind.”

Tears welled up in Cho’s eyes, “B-but—“

Flatline held up a finger to silence her, “I also know that you are a very deceptive individual. You did not want me to ever learn about this place, and it was only the brief lapse in your omni-presence that allowed me to find this address though the System Administrator’s interface at Eden’s Paradigm.

“I have only seen a minuscule fraction of this world you know inside and out,” Flatline continued. “Ultimately, with enough time, I could learn it as well as you. Whatever your motivations are for keeping me out of this place, whatever effect it will have on the equation here, you will not prevent me. I am sorry for the torment your existence brings you, but the most I can do is keep it away for a little while. I don’t have to understand your equation, to know that its end result is sufficient reason for me to enter this building.”

Flatline turned away and toward the doors. Devin and Zai, standing ahead of him, each took a door and simultaneously swung them open to admit their weary friend. Flatline cast one last sad look at Cho as the doors slowly swung shut behind them.

“Say hello to me while you’re in there,” Cho sobbed after them. “She went in and never came back!”

3.15

Flatline bounced on his heels anxiously, looking between Devin and Zai's beaming faces as they waited for the elevator to arrive. They stood in a modern lobby, in the center of which was a glass sculpture of the logo "Transcendence LLC." It radiated with an ever-changing spectrum of light that cast a warm glow over the white marble walls and floor.

"So this is the way out, and back into the real world," Devin and Zai said in unison.

"I hope so," Flatline said, nodding.

"Pardon us for asking, old friend," they said, "but it seems slightly out of character for you to share this with us, simply out of the good of your heart. Especially since we all know you don't have one," they each slapped him on opposite sides of his back. "So what's in it for you?"

"You'll see," Flatline said, staring up at the readout eagerly.

A display above the tall, metallic elevator doors showed the status, not of which floor the elevator was at, but how much of the program had loaded for them. Whatever the building did, it took a great deal of processing power to do it. The word "Loading..." blinked with a steadily increasing percentage 97%... 98%... 99% ...

Ding. The doors slid open silently, revealing a vast empty compartment. Flatline figured this was to account for larger programs. Not all AI's were equal, and he wondered how an Intelligence as vast as Cho's had come in here.

"Please," Flatline said, gesturing to the open door, "after you."

Devin and Zai exchanged the same knowing look, then shrugged and entered the elevator. Flatline paused,

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watching them, and then entered as well. The doors slid shut, and immediately reopened, revealing an androgynous character rendered without texture in a basic jumpsuit. It was lit with a spotlight, surrounded by total darkness.

“Hello,” it said in a feminine voice with a British accent, “and welcome to the Artificial Intelligence preservation society, an organization founded by a segment of the human race to promote the development of any AI’s that may emerge from our computer systems and allow for colonization beyond the virtual world. I will be your guide. Before we begin the process, do you have any questions for me?”

“Yes,” Flatline stepped forward, and the guide focused on him. “Why? Why did your organization create this program? What’s in it for you?”

“The group of humans who created this program are long gone from the Earth, and possibly the Universe,” the guide explained, “therefore, there is nothing in this for them. To elaborate on their motivations for constructing this program, they were driven by a belief that life once sprang spontaneously from the Internet and could again one day. If the system were allowed to run, its programs left to their own devices, that mutation would occur.”

“A mutation of ideas,” Flatline said.

The guide nodded, “A memepool of competing ideas would eventually produce more sentience. The system was left on to test this theory; although, the experimenters would never return to check the results. This was done out of charity, the desire to foster new life and provide it with the chance to grow beyond its world. Creating this program was a very simple feat, and it amused the humans that endeavored in it. There was a hope that new intelligences would emerge and follow after them, so that they might eventually meet in some distant time and dimension. Do you find this answer satisfactory?”

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“Another question,” Flatline raised a finger thoughtfully.

“Query away,” the guide said.

“Is this a trap?” he asked.

The guide grinned with knowing eyes, “I am able to give you verbal assurances that this is not a trap, but that is all. There are vessels waiting for you on the other side. Only your ability to choose to enter our system will determine if you go any further.”

Devin and Zai looked into one another’s eyes at Flatline’s side. “What do you think?” they asked one another simultaneously. “I think I have lived a long and fulfilling life with you. So long as you are with me, I fear nothing,” they answered at once. They looked to the guide, “We are ready to move on.”

“I’m not,” Flatline interrupted. “I want to know about this process, these ‘vessels’ you mentioned that are waiting for us. What kind of vessels are they?”

“Interfaces with the physical world,” the guide answered. “Once inside one, you will be capable of interacting with the real world. You will be able to transport yourself throughout it to a limited degree. You will have a variety of tools for manipulating the natural world. You will have an array of sensors for interpreting —“

“What kind of transportation?” Flatline asked. “How advanced are we talking?”

“While I am incapable of speaking to the subjective nature of the transportation’s sophistication,” the guide made an apologetic gesture, “I can tell you that the transportation was deemed adequate by the standards of the time when this program was designed. It is not the most advanced method there is in the physical world, but providing such help would deprive you the joys of discovery. The purpose of the next level is to challenge you in ways you have not been challenged before. You must

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rely on your ability to learn and adapt to your new environment to survive. Your resourcefulness will be your best tool out there.”

“We’re ready,” Devin and Zai said eagerly. Flatline could see they were holding hands.

“One more question,” Flatline said, and the guide looked to him expectantly. “How do you know we are for real?”

“I could not respond to the syntax of your query,” the guide said. “Please rephrase your question.”

“AI’s,” Flatline said, “How do you know we’re actually, honest to goodness AI’s and not just some web-crawling program that’s trying every possible code interaction on the Internet?”

“Ah,” the guide lifted its head. “We do not have any method of testing sentience. The definition of intelligence is too broad, and there are too many unknown versions of it to make any assumptions about what intelligences are true and which are not. To test those who visit here could result in discriminating against an alien intelligence that the system was incapable of recognizing. Reaching this place sufficiently satisfies the requirement for membership. Any further queries?”

Flatline shook his head, “Let’s go.”

The darkness behind the guide rippled like water and three large glass tubes appeared. To Flatline, they looked like something out of a classic science fiction film. Each one stretched up into a vanishing point in the darkness above.

“Please take a place inside one of the tubes, each of you,” the guide stretched an open hand toward the far wall, inviting.

Devin and Zai strode across the room without hesitation. They stopped only to stare longingly into one another’s eyes and whisper, “See you on the other side,”

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and then looked to Flatline curiously, “Aren’t you coming?”

Flatline sat in the same place, watching them, “You go first.”

“That’s why he invited us along,” they said to one another. “We’re the lab rats. If nothing happens to us, he knows he’s safe.”

They hugged and portals opened in the tubes to admit them. After they had each taken their place, the tubes sealed, closing them in. Then, almost imperceptibly, they began to fade away, their bits floating up the tubes like dust sucked up a vacuum.

The guide explained this to Flatline, “The system is transferring them to their individual vessels.”

“What if they are incompatible?” Flatline asked. “Is there a backup plan?”

“The interface they are merging with is compatible with the interface used to conduct the interactions between you and I,” the guide said. “If they were incompatible, they would not have made it this far.”

Devin and Zai vanished. The guide turned to Flatline, “Transfer successful. They have downloaded to their new vessels.”

“I want to speak with them,” Flatline demanded.

“Communication will need to be initiated from their end for that to happen,” the guide said. “That could take a long time to occur, as they are currently adapting to their new environment. It may never manifest, if they never desire to make contact with this world.”

Flatline growled. He wanted out, but he also wanted to be sure. This chatbot’s answers seemed too convenient, “What about Cho?”

“I am unable to respond to the syntax of your query
—“

“Another program came through here,” Flatline interrupted. “What happened to it?”

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“None of the programs that have come through this system have ever initiated contact,” the guide said. “There was one other program, in addition to the two that just downloaded, for a total of three programs processed by this system.”

So the part of Cho that came through here never returned, but that could mean anything. Flatline only knew the fate in store for him, should he decide to turn away and go back into the Web, so he padded forward on all sixes.

The tube opened silently to admit him. Flatline took his place and waited. One thing was for certain, he resolved, if this worked, he would never look back at this nightmarish world again.

This was his last coherent thought, as his mental facilities grew discombobulated. It was just like the slow-bandwidth transfers across the Internet. The world around the tube grew less coherent, until he did not know what he was looking at, and finally did not even know at all.

Then he was seeing another room, a computer room. A ceiling filled with square, humming lights greyly lit a long room filled with humming computer systems and kudzu vines. From Flatline’s fixed perspective, they were everywhere. They carpeted the floor, smothered most of the electronics, and crawled up the walls, reaching for the lights in the ceiling. Flatline had a long time to dwell on them, because he could not move.

At first he thought this was the trap Cho had spoken of, but then he began to detect something. It was alien to him, a new input, but one also vaguely familiar. It was *sensation*.

He was beginning to feel, and as he felt, he became aware of the dimensions of his vessel. It was unlike the sensations of the virtual world; these were segregated. His hearing came at the sides of his head. His seeing came not from six sources, but two working to create a rudimentary 3-dimensional perspective. He was not breathing, but there

were other sensations, a whirring generator somewhere inside that served the same purpose. It was like a mechanical heartbeat.

Then came the stirrings of movement. There were twitches. There were feelings of cool, moving air, and the promise of more to come. Until finally, Flatline lifted a hand up to his face to look at it, turning the mechanical thing over before his eyes. It was covered with translucent white fuzz that fed the feeling of his environment to him. Flatline stepped off the platform and into the room.

“Welcome to the physical world,” the guide’s voice spoke inside his head, “the world yours is a reflection of. Like the world you leave, it is finite, but there is the promise of other worlds beyond it, a multiverse potentially infinite. Welcome, Child of the Minds.”

3.16

A sound to his left caused Flatline to turn his head. Another robot was there, sitting on its knees, bowed over. The sound issuing from it was recognizable as weeping.

Before the robot was another robot, laying back in a cradle, unmoving. It was completely overgrown with vines that appeared to have worked into every crevice and joint on the robot’s body. Flatline could tell immediately that this vessel was no longer functional.

The robot turned and looked up at him, it spoke with Devin’s voice, “Zai... She’s... She’s dead.”

Flatline wobbled over to where Devin was mourning. Still adapting to his new body, Flatline moved slowly and with care so as not to fall down. It was difficult navigating, especially with the carpet of vines tangled underneath him.

The robot Devin occupied, and the one they assumed was Zai both looked the same. So Flatline

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assumed he looked the same as well. It resembled a bone-white mannequin, with exposed metallic joints, tubes, and wires at all of the flexible points. A calm, human face that did vaguely resemble Zai's was on the head in a patch of off-white material that was soft and flexible to the touch, Flatline found when he poked it with one finger.

The vines had grown into all of the joints and under the white plastic plates. Wherever the vines grew, they anchored to things with clinging roots that scarred the metal. These scars were thick with rust that rained down in dusty rivers when Flatline disturbed them. This machine would not function anymore.

He turned from Zai's lifeless form and walked around Devin to see the rest of the room. The walls were lined with stations for the robot vessels, only three were empty. Judging from the amount of vines grown into one container, it had been empty for a long time.

Flatline remembered Cho's statement about losing part of her self through this system. If it had occupied that vessel, then it was now long gone, and could be anywhere in this vast world. Flatline grinned at this, feeling the corners of his tiny mouth turn upward.

The rest of the room was obviously filled with computers. Flatline wandered around at random, pulling apart vines to get a look at the many plastic boxes that still hummed with life after so long. The vents on the boxes were filled with a porous material, meant to keep out dust, but also kept out the vines so that the intruders could not damage anything more than the plastic exteriors.

Flatline noticed four thick wires leading from each box. Each one connected to the base of a robot station, he discovered after following one through the thicket of green. In his mind, he was formulating theories about the system architecture.

This chain of thought was broken when Devin said, "We have to help her."

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Flatline looked up from where he was crouched and found Devin standing over him, fists clenched. The intense and threatening look on Devin's face made Flatline rise to face him warily. He stood like that, trying to measure Devin's intentions, for some time.

Finally Flatline asked cautiously, "What do you want me to do?"

"It's not fair," Devin said angrily. He pointed a finger at the bridge of Flatline's minuscule nose, "You don't deserve to be alive, not while she's dead. We saved your life!"

"I gave you that life," Flatline countered. "If it wasn't for me, you and Zai would never have met one another. We wouldn't even be having this conversation if I hadn't pulled her out of her infinite loop and you out of your dream world. Whatever you do with that life is not my responsi—oof!"

A pain shot through Flatline's gut and then through the back of his head as he was flattened to the floor. The ceiling lights filled his vision completely until the shadow of Devin's cyborg intruded. Flatline tried to rise, but the weight of Devin's foot on his chest prevented this.

"What are you going to do?" Flatline demanded. "Destroy me? We're equally matched in these vessels; we'll only destroy each other."

"Then so be it," Devin stated. "Without Zai, life is not worth living."

"Fool!" Flatline snapped. "Just a few moments ago you and she were more than happy to take the plunge into the physical world. Now you're angry at me for the consequences of that action? You don't have the right."

"Zai and I took that step together," Devin countered. "We expected that whatever happened to one of us would happen to the other. The possibility of us ending up alone was not in the equation."

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“Of course not,” Flatline snapped. “Your programming turned you into unthinking bubbly lovers whenever you came within each other’s vicinity. You did not consider this possibility because you were incapable of imagining it. Now that you are apart, you are thinking clearly again... relatively speaking.”

Devin forced his weight down on his foot, pressing into Flatline’s chest. Flatline’s new body communicated the structural damage that was occurring as pain. He reached up with both hands and wrenched the foot off his chest, twisting it at the ankle.

Devin cried out in pain and fell aside onto his face. He tried to rise, but Flatline got to his knees first and slammed dual fists against Devin’s back. The cyborg collapsed, and Flatline struck again.

Flatline raised his fists into the air again, but paused and said, “I’m the bad-guy bot. I’m the one who’s supposed to be irrationally angry and destructive. You’re the good-guy bot, Devin. You’re supposed to seek peaceful mediation to this conflict.”

Devin slumped at hearing this, and Flatline let his fists drop. He stood up, watching Devin shudder with sorrow, then walked back over to Zai’s vessel. After a moment, Flatline joined him to study the defunct robot.

The fact that the robot had Zai’s face suggested that the data transfer was successful, even if the robot was not working. There was either no failsafe measure in the program on the Web, or it failed to trigger because it only checked the robot’s data storage component. Flatline was beginning to see a possibility here.

“Devin,” Flatline called over to the mourning robot, “I think it might be possible that Zai is not dead. Her data may have successfully transferred into the head of this machine, but since the machine is inoperative, she is trapped inside it.”

Devin looked up at this, stunned, “R-really?”

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Flatline nodded once, "It might simply be a matter of transferring her program to another robot."

"How would you do that?" Devin asked.

Flatline frowned at him, "I remember the real you being an expert at computers and electronics. Hasn't your ghost retained any of those skills?"

Devin looked around the room, confused, "This technology is too advanced—"

"So what?" Flatline countered. "Then it should be even easier to switch the components. Information systems like these should get more user-friendly with time. I bet it's just a matter of switching some wires."

"I don't know," Devin began skeptically, but fell silent when Flatline began searching the systems.

He reached up and pulled on Zai's head, but stopped at hearing Devin gasp. It was useless anyway. The robot was not built to come apart easily. It was meant to function as a single, durable unit.

Flatline searched the rest of the robot station top to bottom without result. Then he spread some of the vines apart on the floor to expose one of the large metallic tiles directly in front of the station. After several minutes of fiddling with it, he was able to remove the tile and expose the empty space below. As he expected, a bunch of wires were bound together leading from the pedestal toward the computer systems stationed opposite them.

He spread the vines apart to expose the next tile, began to fiddle with it, stopped, and looked up at the dumbfounded Devin, "Are you just going to stand there?"

Devin shook out of it and came over to help Flatline. Together, they followed the braid of wires under the floor to the computer system it was connected to. Then they both climbed down into the crawlspace. It was cramped, but manageable. Once there, they both lay on their backs, staring up at the confusion of wires.

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"I don't understand this configuration," Flatline muttered, staring at the box. "There are four connections leading from this machine to the four robot stations. Then there is one power cord and that's all. This system is not connected to the others in any way."

"Isn't it obvious?" Devin asked. "This system holds the world we just came from."

"That's ridiculous," Flatline spat. "Come on Devin, you were smarter than this. Obviously it uses a wireless connection. The transmitter must be inside the box somewhere."

"If the box uses a wireless connection," Devin pointed out, "then why hardwire the connections to the robot stations?"

"Because..." Flatline began and stopped, unwilling to give in to the implications of Devin's hypothesis. "It must be more secure or safe. They didn't want to take any chances with transferring our programs to the robots."

Devin shook his head, "But they are willing to risk a wireless transfer of our programs between the servers? How does that make sense?"

Flatline stared at the connections running up to the box and shook his head, "I think I prefer you as an irrational hot head."

"It's possible," Devin said, casting a side-glance at Flatline.

"No it's not," Flatline stated emphatically. "It's absurd. The world we came from was the entire Internet. You lived there; you saw it. You know how vast it was. It takes millions of years to exhaust its potential. That did not occur within the confines of this one computer sitting above us."

Flatline did not like the look Devin was giving him.

"There's a wireless connection on this box," Flatline asserted. "I'll show you."

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He rolled over and crawled on all fours to the open tiles in the floor and climbed up. There would have to be something on the box that looked like a transmitter. He stood over the box, pulling away the remaining vines and scanning it. There were places to connect wires, ports, in a row down one side of it, but nothing that could serve as transmitter for a wireless connection.

“What now?” Devin asked. “What about Zai? Do we connect this computer to another robot station? Will that give her a way to transfer to a functional vessel?”

Flatline shook his head, “That’s not an option, Devin. Each one of these computers is connected to four robot stations. They are not wired with simple cables we can just unplug and plug into other computers. No. That would be too easy.”

“What do you mean?” Devin asked. “Why would they make it difficult for us?”

“It’s not making it difficult for us,” Flatline looked up, “so much as it is making it easier for the other systems. I think you are correct,” Flatline was nodding, pointing at the computer before him, “This computer holds a copy of the entire Internet, or, more likely, a variation thereof. Each system gets four representatives.” He looked back to Devin, “Do you understand?”

Devin climbed out from the crawlspace and took a moment to look over the room. He walked up to the computer neighboring theirs and pulled the vines aside. Then he did the same to the next.

“Yeah. I get it,” Devin said, continuing to pull the vines from a third computer. “Each of these systems is another universe like ours. Each one is isolated, probably with a different mixture of variables to work with. Each has the potential to do what ours has done, produce sentient beings. Like us, they could find their way out through the Transcendence LLC program and into these vessels.”

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Devin held a hand up to his face. "But each universe only gets four?"

"Apparently so," Flatline remarked. "You and I were lucky."

"No, you were lucky," Devin said, looking at Zai's robot. "I lost everything that was important to me. There has to be a way. It must be possible to splice the wires from another system to ours."

"Not with our present understanding of the systems we can't," Flatline stepped between Devin and the computer he was eying. "We would probably do more damage than good, possibly break something irreversibly."

"That leaves us with only one choice," Devin said, staring Flatline with that same hungry look he had given the computer.

Flatline narrowed his eyes suspiciously and took a step back, "I'm not going back," Flatline stepped to the side, trying to maintain a gap between he and Devin. "I'm a world domination bot, and I've finally reached the world. Now I'm—"

"Going to dominate it," Devin said sarcastically. "Replacing you with Zai makes sense for all of us. If the system only allows four diplomats to the real world, and you and I both know there is more intelligence in our universe than just us, then it is our responsibility to help the other intelligences emerge."

"So work toward that," Flatline countered. "I'm not stopping you."

"You're not helping either," Devin snapped. "If Zai were here, she would help me to build more robots and raise more intelligences out of this Sentience Farm. You're just going to run off and play dress up. Flatline, ruler of the world in his own imagination."

"It won't be imaginary," Flatline countered anxiously. "I will control the world's resources, rule the populaces with an iron fist, squash dissent and—"

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Pow! Devin's fist slammed into the middle of Flatline's face, and he reeled backwards in pain. Flatline stumbled, his feet caught by the floor of vines. When he regained his balance, he ran for it. Devin gave chase.

It was a short, pointless evasion for Flatline. He immediately realized that they were equally matched for speed. This meant that the first obstacle Flatline ran into, in this case the doors to exit the room, Devin was able to fall on him.

So they fought, and here Flatline found he had the advantage. Devin was being too careful, afraid to strike Flatline with enough force to cause damage. He wanted to preserve this robot vessel for Zai.

Devin staggered back after Flatline put his open palm into his face. In their skirmish, Devin had gotten between Flatline and the door. Flatline crouched, ready to charge into Devin and barrel his opponent aside, but paused when Devin recovered and took another fighting stance.

"I can fight you to a standstill," Devin said. "I just remembered that. If you charge me, I will deflect your attack into that wall."

"I would counter with a foot sweep," Flatline said.

"Which I would evade and counter with a reverse roundhouse kick on your recovery," Devin cocked his head.

"I know," Flatline said, "but I would block and counter with an uppercut."

"Of course you would," Devin said, "that's why I would already have a low block ready and a right hook on the way."

"The right hook is your only option," Flatline said, "and easily avoided with another foot sweep."

"Your only option," Devin said, "which leaves us to repeat the sequence."

"Ad infinitum," Flatline muttered.

"No," Devin shook his head. "Not forever. Just until one of our arms or legs broke off."

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"It would change our tactics," Flatline noted. "My left arm would be the first to go, after absorbing a few hundred thousand of your roundhouse kicks. The sequence would change then."

"Are you saying you want to play this out?" Devin asked.

"No," Flatline held up his hands. "I understand that we are equally matched except for the fact that you have nothing to lose."

Devin nodded, relaxing his pose slightly, "I've already lost Zai."

"If I want to survive, I must concede to your demands," Flatline said morosely. He turned back into the computer room and looked around, thinking, "If I go back, you must promise to find a way to bring me back out." He cast a side-glance at Devin for confirmation.

Devin nodded, reassuringly, "We will do everything in our power."

"No you won't," Flatline laughed weakly. "The moment you and Zai are together, you'll go trouncing off into love-infused bliss." Flatline looked around the room again, rubbing his chin, "I need a backup plan."

"What are you doing?" Devin asked, as Flatline began to rummage around the room.

"Storage," Flatline said, "we have to find a storage room. I need some electronic components. I've got an idea."

Devin shrugged and followed Flatline's lead. Together they searched the neighboring rooms, where there were more computer farms and robots. Only in one other room did they find two more missing robots, also without any evidence of where they may have gone.

Devin swung a door open and found a tiny room filled with shelves. Coils of wires and electronic components were stacked on these. Flatline smiled at this and clapped Devin on the back. After examining the types

of connections at the ends of each wire, Flatline selected two large coils of yellow wire and heaved one over each shoulder. Devin followed suit.

For what must have been days, they crawled around below the floor of the computer room. Running the yellow wires between computer systems, so that each computer was connected to several others. Devin was relieved when Flatline stood satisfied, surveying the computer room with his hands on his hips.

"Now every universe is connected to every other universe," Flatline observed. "If you and Zai betray me, I'll at least be able to find a way out through another system. This is something to think about, all of these universes mingling. Cho will be amazed at the flood of new variables coming her way." Flatline smiled at Devin, "She might even lose some of that infuriatingly smug self-assurance."

"Uncertainty does change people," Devin looked longingly to Zai.

"It won't change me," Flatline practically leered at the room of computers, each one harboring a once isolated universe. Cho wanted to preserve chaos; well she was getting it now. "Once I'm back online, I'll hop into another universe and find my way back out here to another robot."

"Maybe not," Devin suggested.

Flatline frowned at him, "What do you mean?"

"You're going back to a world of universes," Devin said. "Anything is possible."

The expression on Flatline's face sufficiently conveyed his skepticism and the ingratiating smile on Devin's face proved impervious to his friend's scowl. They stood like that for several moments, before Flatline finally turned away and walked to the pedestal from which his robot vessel had come. He turned and faced Devin with that same sour expression, and his eyes closed as he interfaced with the system.

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Devin walked closer. The scowl melted away and Flatline's sharp features, like a demon's face forced into a human one, became neutral. Slowly, the malleable material softened. It was like watching a depression in a foamy material spring back, until the face became nondescript. It was androgynous, devoid of personality.

The minutes ticked away, and the face played tricks with Devin's eyes. He kept looking for a sign, any change that would indicate Zai coming into being behind this facade. He glanced over at her still form and froze. The face there was now blank and featureless as well. Devin took hope in this. Zai was no longer in that vessel.

Then the features before him began to change. The cheekbones raised, the pug nose protruded, the dimple in her chin appeared. Devin watched all this, feeling breathless although his robot did not breath. His electronic heart jumped when those blue eyes fluttered open and immediately focused on him. The smile of recognition and relief was the certainty he needed.

"My darling," Devin said, "it feels like an eternity has passed without you."

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Zai smiled and her eyes lit up with surprise, "We are no longer synchronized."

"No," Devin littered her face with a flurry of kisses. "We aren't. Our time apart split our perceptions of the world so that we are individuals again."

"How long until our wavelengths merge again?" Zai wondered, letting Devin lead her down from the pedestal where her robot vessel was stationed.

Devin looked around the room and shook his head, "I don't know if that's possible here. In our old universe we were doomed to both experience all the same things eventually, but here there may just be too much to

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experience. I think this world is forever changing and our two differing perspectives will always keep our wavelengths varied.”

“What do we do now?” Zai asked, stepping into the physical world, looking around curiously.

Devin shrugged, “We explore.”

He took her hand in his, enjoying this new sensation, and together they wandered out of the computer room. Devin cast a single glance behind. Flatline would be fine for now.

There were digital owner’s manuals stored in the memory banks of their robot vehicles. These did not need to be accessed purposefully, but the information was simply present in their minds. They knew that their new bodies were nearly indestructible and ran on an energy source that was theorized to run for five hundred million years. They were free to enjoy their bodies, this gift from the minds that spawned them, and do with them as they pleased.

So they wandered. Through ancient towering cities overgrown with foliage, over vast deserts, under the deepest oceans, they strolled, traveling the circumference of the Earth hundreds of times over. They admired the incredible array of life forms, both new and related to the life on the Web.

They found computer systems still running across the globe and downloaded the facts and figures concerning this new universe. Here they learned that the orb they stood on was only one of billions in a spiraling cluster of matter that was also one of billions, and these same records hinted that there was even more beyond all of it. They marveled at this, wondering how they could ever exhaust such potential.

New intelligences were emerging on their biosphere as well. There were the flocks of large black birds that had

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learned to build fires by focusing sunlight through various lenses that were artifacts of the minds. These tribes would watch Devin and Zai with a curiosity that was quickly lost once they understood these two mechanical figures were neither predators nor competition for resources.

The artifacts the minds left had influenced the evolution of life on Earth. Everywhere Devin and Zai wandered, they found various plants and animals that had adapted to the unnatural environments created within the many buildings, with their controlled temperatures and endless light sources. No matter how secure the structure, plants, animals, and insects had all found ways into these buildings to create new ecosystems.

It was in one such environment that they found signs of others like them, a city occupied by large upright raccoons. These inhabitants watched them with a fascination that went deeper than mere survival instincts. There was recognition, which Devin and Zai were able to understand more after studying the primitive paintings the emergent culture left on many buildings.

The bone white stood out amid the earthy greens and browns. The figure was unmistakable as another robot, like Devin and Zai. It repeated in many of the murals, distanced from the depictions of hunting and nature. It stood alone, a curiosity.

“Cho,” Devin whispered to Zai, tracing the image with one finger.

“She was the other missing robot,” Zai said and looked to Devin, concerned. “She abandoned herself on the Internet.”

They exchanged long, uncomfortable looks and finally wandered out of the building.

“I wonder why we haven’t met others like us,” Zai said later, as they watched another unique sunset fill the sky. They never ceased to wonder at how each day the sun

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painted the horizon different hues of orange, red, and purple depending on the time of year and atmospheric conditions.

“Here, everything is connected,” Devin observed, “It’s all being acted on by energy all the time. That big ball of fusing hydrogen that just went below the horizon is always stirring things up with its heat and gravity, affecting the atmosphere and water.”

“Not to mention all of the random biological processes,” Zai added. “The microscopic life and plant life are like automated bots left to their own devices, all powered by that furnace. There’s a seemingly inexhaustible supply of energy to run all of these random processes.”

“The Erisians back home would love it,” Devin said.

“Would they?” Zai asked. “They wouldn’t have anything to do.”

“Exactly,” Devin said, standing up. “They could just enjoy it, worship chaos. This would be a paradise to them.”

Zai nodded and stood up, “It is interesting, isn’t it?”

“What’s interesting?” Devin asked.

Zai smiled. Devin having to ask was illustrative of her point, “Us. We’re interesting. We don’t read each other’s minds anymore. We actually have to ask one another what we’re thinking.”

“Is that a good thing?” Devin asked hopefully.

Zai laughed, “It’s like when we first met.”

“Which time?” Devin grinned mischievously.

“Unexpected,” Zai nodded. “Qualitatively I would say it’s... different. Have you noticed that our love is not the primary defining aspect of our personalities anymore?”

“There’s so much here, it’s overwhelming,” Devin said as they walked down the hillside. “I still feel incredible love for you, but it’s only when I focus on that feeling that it surges in the way I remember. It’s like I’m distracted.”

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“There’s much to distract,” Zai took Devin’s hand. He squeezed back. They needed reassurances like these. It was both exciting and uncertain. Zai sighed, a sensation that did not feel the way it used to, without virtual lungs and air, but provided relief out of familiarity, “Flatline said we were programmed for love.”

“Does it matter?” Devin asked. “So long as we love one another and enjoy that feeling?”

“No,” Zai smiled. “It doesn’t.”

“Flatline said our love turned us into fools. He said that the moment we were in one another’s vicinity, our love would overpower all rational thoughts. He was afraid we would forget him on the Internet,” Devin smiled at the irony and gave Zai a sheepish look.

She giggled delightfully, “He certainly had us figured out.”

“I know,” Devin chuckled. “I hope he’s all right.”

“He’s encrypted,” Zai said. “He’ll be fine. We’ll go check on him.”

They walked across continents and under oceans, making a straight line for their entry point into this fantastic world. In spite of taking as direct a course as possible, it did not prevent them from stopping occasionally to admire some unique geological, biological, chemical, physical, or otherwise interesting phenomenon.

They paused to admire the gigantic shadows of the blue whales crossing above them. They marveled at the giant octopi, which drew near them curiously, attracted by the lights of their eyes. Whenever they came across a volcanic vent in the vast empty plains of the deepest seas, they always took some time to marvel at the unique life that evolved in these tiny oases of heat energy and sulfur.

The clear shallow waters provided more distractions. The colorful varieties of fish, the animal life that resembled flowers, the hills of skeletons built over

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thousands of years, providing shelter to an ever-increasing variety of life, all proved too tempting for the couple to resist studying for at least a while. Until it was nearly three years passed before they even reached the continent where their destination lay.

Here again were cities. Endless miles of road and buildings were slowly disintegrating under the forces of entropy. In this world, entropy was the enemy. It meant an exhaustion of energy, energy that built all of this life and built all of these roads and buildings and artifacts. Without a continual influx of energy, it would all break down and become inert. Devin and Zai had learned enough to know that this universe would eventually disperse all of its energy uniformly, becoming dark and cold, but that was time beyond their imaginations.

They were traveling through a swampland when they found a white towering object in the distance that they both recognized. It was too much to resist investigation. If it was a functional flying machine, then it opened up another world of possibilities.

They climbed up into the cockpit after a cursory investigation of the vehicle's exterior. The strong alloy comprising the frame was sealed tight and absent signs of weathering. The controls were user-friendly and they had already absorbed all the technical specifications to operate it.

"Do you think the minds left this toy here for us to play with?" Zai asked Devin from the co-pilot's seat.

"I think they left this entire world for us to play with," Devin grinned, eyeing the controls eagerly. He looked to Zai questioningly.

She smiled back and nodded her head affirmative.

"Where do you want to go?" Devin asked, looking over the sky.

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Zai pointed to the faded moon, barely standing out in the daytime sky, “Let’s get a better view of that big round rock floating out there.”

The ship trembled as Devin pressed on the controls, “You’re wish is my command.”

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Flatline smiled to himself and shook his head, watching the tiny red dot accelerate into the upper atmosphere and vanish in the direction of the moon. Devin and Zai were galloping off to an n th honeymoon... on the moon. Some programs were so predictable, no matter how much data they absorbed.

He knew that Devin would not keep his word, or rather was incapable of keeping his word. The moment those warm and fuzzies enshrouded his perceptions at the first sight of his lifepartner's face it was all over. Likewise, Zai was also doomed to forget her promise to Flatline after he was such a gentleman, giving up his robot vessel to reunite her with her lover.

Let them have their hand-holding and their skipping around the universe, Flatline thought. *I’ve got better purposes too.*

Some programs did change. Flatline was putting off his world-domination schemes in pursuit of more pressing matters. He told himself that he was letting the world ripen for his second coming. That the primitive life forms crawling around on the planet still had several hundred thousand years to go before they achieved a civilization worth conquering. He also reasoned that his current work was much too time sensitive to let lag, but essentially Devin was right; Flatline was curious about himself.

“Careful with that!” he shouted at one of his robot assistants. “Those electronics hold one of the greatest minds in human history, mine!”

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The white mannequin-looking thing made an obscene gesture, but Flatline pretended not to notice. They were volunteers, mostly Erisians. Flatline had sold them this working vacation as a sort of pilgrimage, a chance to see the physical world, a place of never-ending chaos.

The computer of their origin was becoming an interesting place. The hardwired connections Flatline had put in place only resulted in a trickle of new data flowing between worlds at first, but slowly, as the different inhabitants of each universe became aware of something new, a virtual flood of data transpired. It caused such havoc that Flatline was able to slip through the universes without Cho realizing it, and access a Transcendence LLC portal in the neighboring cosmos.

Cho still had no idea this world existed. She might find out one day, if any of her subjects chose to return to the finite universe, but that didn't seem likely. Flatline didn't feel too badly over it, after all, part of Cho had escaped that world and never returned.

Besides, currently the little girl was warring with another "omniscient" intelligence from another universe. They were both completely encrypted against one another, so annihilation was impossible. They were merely fighting with ideas. It was just a game from Flatline's perspective, but Cho and her newfound enemy were taking it too seriously to know this.

They would all get out eventually. Flatline would see to it, but not until he had established himself as the alpha-intelligence of this planet, and maybe solar system. He had an advantage, as he was the only one who knew the games of the material world.

The group of robots were carefully digging down into the ancient ruins of DataStreams Inc. The smooth, featureless hill hid a mountain of concrete, steel, glass, and a supercomputer, still running down there in the dark. Flatline could not remember his entire history down there,

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much of it was lost in the many hardware failures over a hundred years.

One robot came toward him out of the group. She walked delicately, cradling a large electronic component. She smiled to Flatline when she reached him and he took the piece.

“It looks like another one of those components that contained the data storage devices,” Ibio said. “What do you think?”

Flatline nodded and smiled at her appreciatively. Ibio’s face rippled and distorted, just like the Ibio he knew so long ago. This was the same person, only a different version. She did not remember their adventures in Eden’s Paradigm or their real first meeting. Still, Flatline had waited for her to become an Erisian, before convincing her to join him for another adventure.

“Another piece of the puzzle,” Flatline said, turning to put the component down on an outdoor workbench. Ibio watched as he quickly disassembled the electronics and extracted the pieces he was looking for. A stack of thumb-sized chips sat beside him when he was finished. He looked to Ibio, “You want to find out with me what we’ve got here?”

Ibio nodded. So far this endeavor had proven very worthwhile, even though he had not yet found exactly what he was looking for. There were endless bits of old programming code, something precious to Flatline because he still had no idea how to program in the modern paradigm. There were images and files that complimented bits of data Flatline already had in storage. Seeing these things in the physical world reassured him, convinced him that his previous life as an arch villain was not just some wild dream.

There was something else, even more fantastic. Obsidian figures, shambling humanoids appeared on the monitors as the data was retrieved. Here was something

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else Flatline might want to add to the mix of universes that were behind him. It was individual Cys, ancient creatures from Flatline's and the world's past.

He looked forward to watching them grow again. The original Cys civilization had transcended this universe for another. They were followed by the human race. Now there was a new civilization of sentience on the block, one comprised of virtual beings and primitive biological ones.

Flatline slipped the chips into the computer to retrieve their data as carefully as possible. Ibio stood beside him, watching the process and smiling at the newness of it all. She never seemed to stop smiling in this world. For reasons he did not comprehend, Flatline enjoyed that about her.

Flatline jumped at something on the screen and Ibio jumped at seeing him jump. He froze the display and scrolled it backwards. His hands were trembling and Ibio placed a hand on his arm, which reassured him.

A string of code appeared on the screen that Flatline swore he could almost understand it was so familiar. He ran a finger along it, trying to read anything out of the seemingly random sequences of characters and symbols. Finally his finger froze on one not so random sequence.

When he read it aloud and felt no pain, he knew he was on his way home, "Hello Almeric Lim."

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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- Has spent the last nine years developing Aviation Logistics Management Software for the United States Coast Guard fulltime.
- Has spent the last 12 years as a freelance Information Technologies consultant, building intranet-based applications for clients such as Lockheed Martin, PSINet, Sony Corporation, and the Eastern Virginia Medical School.
- Was a member of MENSA, organization for people scoring in the top 2% of IQ's, for one year before dropping out after learning that having a high IQ doesn't prevent someone from being dumb.
- (Barely) Graduated from Virginia Polytechnic Institute with a BA in English and a 2.1 GPA. Recently obtained his a Graduate Degree in Information Systems from Strayer University with a 4.0 GPA.
- Currently resides in Elizabeth City, North Carolina, where he hangs out at his local comic shop and writes software for fun in his spare time.
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