

Virtual Danger

A Novel in the
Death Noodle Glitterfairy Robot Saga
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Prologue

Robot hadn't finished counting off the opening beats of their second song before Villain interrupted the open-air concert, dropping gently from the sky onto the stage with a steady burn of his jetpack. Robot stopped drumming at the sight of him, and the audience fell silent in shock. A dozen of Villain's Minions fell from above into the crowd, brandishing badges and bludgeons as the bursts of flame from their own jetpacks sputtered to a stop. Noodle looked back and forth from Villain to his Minions in the crowd, feeling protective of the band's fans after what they'd all just been through together, and unsure of Villain's motives. Glitterfairy gently lowered her stand-up bass against its stand, floated gradually up and over her keyboard, and readied herself for action. Robot looked, perplexed, at the object Villain was pulling out from under his long coat, as though he recognized the strange device.

To Noodle and Glitterfairy, the object in Villain's hand looked like a three-way cross between a high-tech assault rifle, a tazer, and a cartoon magnet shaped like a giant 'U'. Two large barrels, crackling and humming with electricity, were spaced widely apart, adorned with all manners of prongs, wires, and tubes, and as they reached Villain's arm

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height were pointed directly toward Robot.

The audience gasped; a few of Robot's biggest fangirls fainted. Noodle still had the microphone in his hand; he'd been expecting to sing the next song, but instead he said to Villain, "Stop. Wait. What are you doing?"

With his free hand Villain produced a badge of some sort from his pocket, waving it all around as though to prove his identity and authority, but without giving anyone an opportunity to see what the badge said, or to check out its legitimacy with the relevant agencies. Villain didn't otherwise identify himself, saying only, "Don't try to stop me, Death Noodle. Yes, yes, I know who your father is." Villain rolled his eyes in Noodle's direction, shaking his head dismissively. "As I'm sure you're aware, copyright enforcement doesn't end just because someone dies. We have a responsibility to protect your rights for your descendants, too."

Glitterfairy hovered as silently across the stage as she could, hoping the tinkling of her twinkling would be too tiny to hear over the rising rhubarb of the anxious audience. Noodle replied, "Look, you can't copyright a beat. Just because Robot is able to exactly recreate any performance he's heard doesn't make him any different from a skilled human drummer." Villain's attention turned back to Robot, his gun arm growing steadier as sweat beaded on his brow. Noodle pleaded, "He isn't just some computer you can deactivate; Robot is as alive as you and I."

Villain began shaking his head again side to side as he pulled the trigger on the device in his hand. It gave four short beeps and one long, loud one before it fired. Time seemed to slow down for Noodle in that moment. The split-second beeps seemed to stretch out for minutes as he threw the

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microphone aside, diving toward Villain, knowing he'd never make it in time.

As Noodle floated slowly across the space between them, he watched the results of Villain's device in action and wished he'd moved sooner or leapt faster or had listened to his father's lessons more closely. He saw Glitterfairy leaping, far faster than he had, into the path of Villain's weapon. He saw the whole front of the device, the big U-shaped construction, appear to leap out of Villain's hand like a wild animal hunting its prey, an electrified tail trailing behind. He watched in horror as the twin points of the device reached Glitterfairy's attempt to save Robot, a massive arc of electricity leaping across the U's gap in the midst of her; tiny bolts of lightning seemed to join every sparkle and twinkle of her being into a brilliant cloud of burning light—then nothing but a silvery dust fell lifeless to the stage as the merciless U moved on. Noodle, still only halfway through his leap, wasn't sure whether his breath were catching in his chest or his heart had simply rent in twain. Villain's device didn't wait for Noodle to understand the undoing it had affected on Glitterfairy, nor did it lose momentum in its electromagnetically-homed journey to Robot's chest, and Noodle ended up seeing the rest with his eyes frozen open in shock:

The two points of the U-shape matched perfectly with the features on Robot's chest he'd repeatedly insisted weren't nipples, locking on and triggering some sort of automated internal reaction. Robot's eyes rolled up until they were solid white, then never rolled back down. His arms fell limp at his sides. His chest opened itself up and a complex and important-looking device, about the size of two fists held together, slid out gently, then jumped as

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though yanked, hitting the back of the device's U-shape with an audible clang. Villain's device began reeling the U-shape, and Robot's captured component, back toward him. Robot was as still and silent as a statue.

Some of the audience was already in tears, more had fainted, and as Noodle's perception of time finally began speeding up, he collapsed in a heap at Villain's feet, his desperate leap too short to have done any good. The rest of the audience, those who'd had enough presence of mind to realize what was going on, became angry rather than sad, and they rushed the stage. Villain's Minions tried to hold them back, and were successful just long enough for Villain to get his jetpack started, the taller fans just out of reach of the soles of his feet.

As Villain rose into the sky, his Minions not far behind him, he shouted back to the frozen form of Death Noodle, silhouetted on the stage by the gathered crowds, "I don't know whether Robot was really alive before, but I can say for sure that he isn't any more," then he disappeared into the dark night sky, the glow of the jetpacks joining the twinkling of the stars above as the last motes of glitter settled silently to the stage below.

Chapter One

Later, after Band Manager and their Roadies had managed to send the majority of the audience home (and the rest of them to give statements to the police), Death Noodle was still reeling from the shock of seeing his two best friends murdered before his eyes by Villain and apparently with the government's authority. Seeing one of his friends fatally dismembered and the other turned into a mound of dust not unlike cremains, from just a few feet away and within mere seconds, Noodle was having trouble believing it was all real. He could still feel his heart beating in his chest, and to Noodle that was a sign that it couldn't have been real; how could he have lived if they had truly died? "How could I have let myself live?" he mumbled.

"What's that?" asked Band Manager.

Noodle shook his head, his long, thin arms wrapped, clutching, around himself. He asked the empty space before him where his friends should have been, "How can this be real? An hour ago . . . and now? What was I supposed to do? What am I supposed to do now?"

"You couldn't have done anything, Noodle," replied Band Manager, "even if you'd reached Villain in time, that device would have found Robot on its own."

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"I know," said Noodle, "I saw." He lowered his head in shame. "I should have reacted faster, like Glitterfairy. I could have been closer. Maybe the two of us, together . . ."

Band Manager put his arm around Death Noodle's shoulders, but Noodle just shrugged him away, curling further into himself. Band Manager said, "You saw what that thing did to her, Noodle, and you know how every device from Robot's home planet has operated; there's nothing on Earth, nothing of Earthly origin anyway, which can stand between such a device and its goal. Just like Robot, and his drums, right?"

"Right," agreed Noodle, nearly smiling for a moment, nodding half a nod before realizing that something had finally come between Robot and his drums. "Except now Robot will never play drums again, will he? Maybe you're right and I couldn't have stopped Villain, but he sure stopped me. Stopped the whole band. Stopped two of us for good." Noodle wanted to lash out in anger, but the Roadies had already packed up all the instruments and equipment so the only things left were Robot's frozen body and the inanimate mound of dust which had been Glitterfairy—neither of which he could have let himself harm in any way. Instead Death Noodle curled up further into himself, watching what was left of Glitterfairy gradually drift away on a gentle summer breeze. "We'll have to re-cancel the tour. Re-refund the tickets, again. Disappoint the fans, and not just for as long as it takes us to solve another case, but for good. How could this have happened?"

"Don't worry about any of that," said Band Manager, "I'll take care of the tour details, the finances, the funeral, you just take care of yourself, Noodle. You've had a roller-

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coaster of a day, with that last triumph coming right before . . . well, this. Let me have someone take you home for the night, so you can have some time and some space away from the worst of it. Alright?”

Noodle gave a slight nod, and Band Manager knew him well enough to discern the difference between merely curling into an ever-smaller ball of twisted noodle and a gesture of begrudging acceptance; he had one of the larger, gentler Roadies carry Death Noodle to the waiting limousine. Noodle was barely aware of the shift, the lift, the long ride back to his big house, or the big blanket pulled over him in his own bed; Noodle was too numb to know the world had gone on all around him. He continued muttering and mumbling to himself all the while, asleep and awake, as hours—and then days—passed away, as his friends had.

On the third day, he rose on his own in search of food. He hated his body, for requiring sustenance, and then he hated the food, for tasting like ash in his mouth, seasoned by the numb void which Noodle felt had replaced his insides. Having acknowledged the world beyond his bedclothes, Noodle found himself surrounded and accosted by more commotion and inquiry than he could handle: His phone rang, and when Noodle answered, Band Manager very politely and gently inquired as to his state of being. Noodle replied with a single sigh, but stayed on the line long enough to learn he'd be gathered up and escorted to Glitterfairy's funeral within the hour.

Death Noodle felt the world around him had also become a numb void, to mirror the one within, painfully opposite in its reflection. He struggled to walk against the viscous, overwhelming everything between his dining room and his

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closet, taking a quarter of an hour to cover an even smaller fraction of a mile. His feet were dragged heavily along, anchors denying reunion, insisting on reality, and Noodle suspected his inner void had begun to merge with the outer void at the sticky junctions beneath his knees. Then he saw the cacophony of colors, fabrics, and inescapable complexities of the contents of his closets, and Noodle knew how too much of what used to be a good thing could also become a meaningless void and object of abject apathy.

As Noodle felt his heart pumping numb emptiness from his core to his extremities, he began to understand for the first time the value of wearing a single color. A solid color. A non-color, a nothing, a black emptiness draped around his outsides to express what had made itself at home on his insides. Death Noodle had nearly managed to button half the buttons on his shirt before Band Manager and a Roadie appeared and took over for him. He did not feel grateful for their assistance; Noodle did not feel anything at all.

As they half-led, half-carried Noodle out to the car and then as they rode across town together to the funeral, Band Manager tried to explain all that had transpired since the night of the concert, saying, "Glitterfairy's parents have been amazing. I don't think it's really hit them, yet, that they're burying their child. No parent should have to go through this and, I guess, they never expected to. They say there's no Earthly force which can end their lives, which is probably why Glitterfairy didn't hesitate in trying to save Robot.

"I've had Robot moved to your lab, mostly to keep the UN from trying to confiscate and disassemble him for study. I thought maybe when you're feeling better, you could take a look at him. See if there's anything to be done. He's always

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recovered on his own before, right? So maybe he's just taking a little longer, this time.

"Your fans have been holding vigil around the clock at the amphitheater. No one else can get in. No one really wants to get in. The acts who haven't voluntarily cancelled out of respect have begun performing acoustic covers of their favorite DNGR songs for the gathered mourners. Fully licensed, of course; everyone wants to do whatever they can to support you, as well as Glitterfairy's family. Sales are through the roof, already. Record numbers, across the entire DNGR catalog. I can't wait to see the numbers after an entire week. The more we sell, the more the press talks about it, the more they talk the more people hear about what happened, and the more music we sell. I couldn't have come up with a better campaign if I'd tried. After you've had a chance to recover, trust me, you'll be glad you survived to reap the rewards of this bad situation."

Luckily for Band Manager, Death Noodle heard it all as a sort of buzzing or warbling white noise, rather than the insensitive, business-headed spiel spewing forth from Band Manager's lips. The only thing getting through was the general idea that Noodle only needed more time, a chance to recover on his own, before it would all really hit home for him. Band Manager went on about interviews he'd scheduled for Noodle, with the press, with the police, with potential replacements to get the band back on the road as soon as possible, and Death Noodle stared out the tinted window, seeing the world in the same desaturated hues he knew it must really be composed of. He tried interrupting Band Manager's nonstop noise, saying, "I think I need some more time, Band Manager. Before I can face all those people, I mean."

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The limousine was pulling up to the church. Band Manager leaned toward Death Noodle and said, "There isn't any more time. No more space. All those people are right on the other side of this door, and they're all waiting to see you. Luckily, you don't have to pretend to be happy. It's a funeral. Even a noodle is expected to grieve the loss of his best friends. So grieve." Band Manager leaned past Noodle and pushed open the door to the unusual mixture of the sounds of thousands of people sobbing and crying with the flashing lights of the cameras capturing the moment for all the fans who couldn't make it to Glitterfairy's funeral in person. "Just grieve while facing all those people, Noodle. The press won't wait any longer. The fans will only go so long without seeing you grieving before they turn on you and find some new band to fall in love with. The UN was threatening to render you and Robot if I couldn't set up an interview, soon."

The paparazzi, respectful at first, had begun their annoyingly familiar cat-calls, trying to get Death Noodle to turn his head so they could get a better shot. Not one of them wanted to be the first one to say his full name at a funeral, and within half a minute their voices had begun to sound like the cooing of a flock of pigeons, all of them repeating, "Noodle, Noodle, Noodle, Noodle, Noodle," asynchronously. Noodle was long-immune to their particular style of noise, and though the familiarity of it began to give texture again to his world as two variants of sensationless white noise seemed to be rubbing against one another in his mind, Death Noodle's eyes remained fixed on Band Manager's.

"You can do this, Death Noodle. You faced down a harem of angry Yeti for Glitterfairy, during the Ice Tzar Caper,

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and then you wrote a song about it. You harnessed the powers of the underworld, even though you never completed your training, when you needed to save Glitterfairy after she was kidnapped by the Invading Hordes of Skeletal Skinneaters, and then you turned the tale of it into a platinum-selling album. It seems like a week hasn't gone by when you haven't done something amazing for Glitterfairy, and now all you have to do is one more thing for her, Noodle." Band Manager grabbed Death Noodle by his shoulders, ready to twist him around and shove him out the back of the limo if necessary.

Noodle replied softly, "Never again." Band Manager let Noodle take a long pause, hoping he'd either continue or get out of the limousine. Noodle's voice was barely above a whisper, and Band Manager had to read his lips to understand him saying, "Death is too final, and I've used my powers too lightly. Death is not to be toyed with. I'll never use my powers again until I finish my training."

Band Manager was only thinking of Noodle's solo career, not his work with the UN. He nodded and said, "Alright. . ." as though it were a question.

Death Noodle continued, "You're so right, Band Manager. I did it all for her. The music, the crazy adventures, everything. Without Glitterfairy, it's all for naught. I never have to do any of it again. No more music, no more adventures, no more inter-dimensional political squabbles interrupting my life. I'll be fine. I'll settle down. Take over the family business, like dad always wanted." Death Noodle slipped easily from Band Manager's grip, turning to face the crowds and the cameras and climbing out of the car. Noodle gave a deep, solemn nod to the assembled masses, and didn't

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have to fake the tears he hadn't been aware of, which had been streaming down his face since waking. He turned back and leaned into the car to say to Band Manager, "I've just got to get through the next few hours, right? Put up with the fans, and the press, and the government, and then I won't have to put up with them, or with you, ever again. Then DNGR will be behind me, and only Death and my grief will be ahead of me."

Before Band Manager knew how to answer, his plans falling to pieces in just a few words from Death Noodle's mouth, Noodle had turned back around and was working his way toward the church, gripping hands seriously and taking comforting hugs from the fans pressed closest to the barricades holding them back. Noodle had been a performer for years, and while he'd nearly convinced himself he would be alright, he knew he still needed to convince the world he was just as broken as they were.

Chapter Two

The actual funeral service managed to further jar Death Noodle from the numbness which had overcome him initially, bringing the world once more into sharp focus all around him. Playing the part of the grieving rock star actually seemed to help Noodle begin to really grieve. Hearing a priest speak about death and life everlasting through the sacrifice of Christ was an interesting contrast to the perspective of Glitterfairy's parents, who had believed they and their daughter had possessed everlasting life without having to believe in the existence of the next world. Somehow those two very different narratives about reality had been able to coexist within Glitterfairy's heart, mind, and soul, and those present in her absence did their best to allow them to coexist at her funeral. Noodle couldn't help but remember Glitterfairy's faith as it was echoed in the words of the priest, and he couldn't help but sense Glitterfairy's joy and spritely energy reflected in her parents' very beings.

Then the remembering of her made Glitterfairy more real a presence in his heart, again, and the warmth was followed rapidly by the reality of the loss of her from the world. Sitting in a pew, listening to those who knew and loved her speaking about all the ways Glitterfairy had improved their

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lives, but in the context of her death, Death Noodle seemed to feel the warmth of her filling him with every inhalation, only to have it replaced with the empty coldness of her absence in every exhalation. He was on a roller-coaster of emotion. Sometimes he was taken on long, slow, deep swings from his heart strings. Sometimes the memories came as fast and sharp as the beating of his heart. When it came time for him to stand up and speak, it was all Death Noodle could do to keep a level head and a steady heart and convince himself everything was going to be alright. When he found his legs carrying him back to his seat, Noodle wasn't even really aware of what he'd said; only that he needed to get through the next few hours so he would be free from the pressure of others' emotions and memories, and free of the need to convince even himself that he was holding up under the pain.

Right on schedule, as everyone else was headed out to join the impossibly-long procession to the sacred grove where Glitterfairy's parents were going to scatter her remains, Band Manager pulled Death Noodle aside. "Can I trust you to do these interviews, Noodle?" he asked. "No more nonsense about giving it all up and going to work for your dad, right? Do you know what that would do to your image, if people thought your reaction to seeing your best friends killed was wanting to watch strangers dying all day, every day, instead of making beautiful music?" Band Manager's eyes rolled, exaggeratedly, as they walked to the church's offices, where he'd set up the interviews. "Believe me, it wouldn't be good. I'm not saying you can't do what you want with your life, Noodle, just give it a little time before you announce a career change to the world. If you're still wanting

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to get out of the business in, say, six months, or a year, then we'll talk about putting out a little press release, getting the word out through appropriate, receptive channels. Not like this, alright, Noodle?"

Noodle nodded, saying, "Look, Band Manager, I just want to get through this day and get home. You've seen me out there, and you saw me up front, right? I'm giving the crowd what they want, like I always do. I'm telling you, I'm fine, and I've been around long enough to know that if the press gets wind of my intention to leave them all behind, I won't hear the end of it. Nothing sells tickets like a retirement tour, right?" Band Manager was salivating at the thought of it. Noodle said, "You'll be the first to know if I decide to go that way, and it won't be today. I don't want to be part of any breaking news, today. Today is all about Glitterfair. I don't need to stand in her spotlight." As he grabbed the knob of the first office and opened the door to face his first interviewer, Noodle mumbled, "I just wish I could still bask in her glow."

As soon as Death Noodle was situated, a lav mic on his collar and the light on his face carefully metered and adjusted, the questions began without any introductions, "What are you going to do to stop Villain from completing his plans and destroying the Internet?"

"What?" Noodle was at a complete loss. "Is that what he's doing?"

"According to analysis of bootleg concert footage and recent server outage patterns, that is, as reported at DNGRfan.com, Villain is using Robot's alien technology to destabilize the Internet, and possibly to hijack the world's

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servers for his own nefarious uses. Channel 4 News wants to know what DNGR plans to do to stop Villain and save the Internet.”

“I, uhh. . . This is the first I’ve heard of this,” replied Noodle. “I thought you’d be asking about Glitterfairy. I’m not. . .”

The reporter’s tone changed, and she asked, “What’s this about? I was promised an exclusive on this. You want more of the back-end?” Death Noodle began calmly removing the lav mic from his collar so he could walk away. The Channel 4 reporter insisted, “Wait, come on, Noodle. DNGRfan.com is the official fan site of the band, and we negotiated this deal with them in good faith. Don’t pretend you aren’t aware of—” but Noodle was heading for the door. She shouted after him, “I know it’s all a hoax! Glitterfairy is undercover and it’s all part of your sting operation! I was promised an exclusive!” He closed the door as firmly and politely as he could.

Band Manager was still standing outside, where Noodle had last seen him. Noodle asked, “Are we making deals with fan sites, now? Fan sites which are spreading lies about Glitterfairy and offering deals to reporters for time with me?”

“Not that I’m aware of,” said Band Manager, heading toward the door Noodle had just exited, “What happened in there?”

“Is there something you haven’t told me about this Villain fellow? Does anyone know who he is or what he’s doing, yet? Or is the UN going to spring that one on me, later?”

“You know the UN never tells me anything. I’m just the band manager, they tell me, and I don’t need to know.” Band Manager wanted to hurry into the room where he could see

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the Channel 4 News team packing up their equipment angrily, but said to Noodle before disappearing into a potential PR nightmare, “Next interview is to the left, just follow the doors around, and no. As far as I know, Villain remains an unknown subject.”

Noodle went to the next door down, where a national news team treated him almost exactly as he’d been surprised the Channel 4 News team hadn’t. Answering questions about DNGR’s history, about Glitterfairy’s life and then about her death, and even vaguely answering a question or two about the band’s future seemed relatively innocuous. Then, with the same professional tone he’d asked all the other questions, the reporter said, “DNGR also has a history of solving mysteries, saving the world from supernatural, extra-dimensional, and otherwise alien forces, as well as assisting the nations of Earth with coming to terms of mutual understanding and cooperation under trying circumstances and pressing need. With acknowledgement that the capabilities of DNGR may have been significantly diminished in the face of this latest challenge, what will DNGR’s response to Villain’s actions be, and what do you believe separates your inevitable response from simple vengeance or, more accurately, from vigilante justice inspired by vengeance?”

“So far, I’ve been leaving it up to the relevant authorities,” replied Noodle, as calmly as he was able, “and hoping they’ll be able to find Villain and bring him appropriately to justice. I haven’t had any contact with the authorities since the night of the attack, and I have no plans to get involved as anything other than a witness to the crimes committed against my friends.” He tried to make light of the situation,

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while reminding them his friends were well-and-truly dead, adding, “I wouldn’t be much use as a crime-fighting team, anyway; I’m just one person.” They let him leave, after that.

The next three interviewers also asked a question or two about what DNGR was going to do about stopping Villain from carrying out whatever evil plan they’d imagined he had in mind for the component stolen from Robot. Noodle tried to answer as politely as possible, while reminding them that with Glitterfairy dead and Robot deactivated, there wasn’t really a DNGR. One after another, he saw the double looks of recognition on their faces as they realized first that DNGR would no longer be around to save them and then that their questions had been inconsiderate of Death Noodle’s grief and loss. He was used to the vapid attention of the media, and Noodle used the familiarity of it to try to convince himself that everything was normal and he was going to be okay.

Then he discovered that his next meeting was with a group of loyal fans. When Death Noodle entered the room, rather than being blinded by the harsh lights of a television reporter’s camera setup, he went nearly unnoticed; his biggest fans were too engrossed in watching a YouTube video of a live DNGR performance to realize Death Noodle himself was watching with them, over their shoulders. It took Noodle almost a full minute to realize what they were watching, and then he leaned in even closer. He wanted to see it from another angle. He wanted to see it in real-time. For a reason Death Noodle was unable to fathom, he wanted to watch his friends die all over again. When he’d leaned in close enough, the others finally noticed him and, apologizing, stopped the video and backed away.

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Noodle restarted it, and watched it to the end.

Then his heart, a huge lump in his throat, started beating again, and moved back down into his chest. He thought to himself, "I really couldn't have stopped him. Even if I'd started moving sooner."

"We're so sorry, Death Noodle," exclaimed one of the teenagers.

"We thought someone would warn us you were coming. Band Manager, or something, and we could turn it off."

"It's okay," replied Noodle, "and call me Noodle."

"Okay, Death Noodle," replied the first teenager, "I mean, Noodle. . . Sir. . . Noodle."

Another teenager slugged the first in the arm, saying, "No sir, and no mention of his father, Bryce, you know this stuff!"

"I just," stammered Bryce, rubbing his arm, "I was beginning to think he wouldn't show up."

"And who would blame him? The love of his life just died, his two best friends just died, his band just broke up, his crime-fighting days are probably over, and now he's probably gonna have to move back in with his dad and take over the family business. Would you want to talk to a bunch of kids you don't know under those circumstances?" The insightful young lady extended her hand to Death Noodle, introducing herself, "I'm Diane. We're from trueDNCR.com, the official fan site of your non-musical adventures, and we're very glad you were able to meet with us. Thank you." Noodle shook her hand, which was what she'd hoped for, and Diane continued, "You've met Bryce, and his brother Eric. That's Shawn, whose computer you've commandeered, and the little one in the corner is Virginia, but you can call her G. She's shy, and

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so are most of the letters in her name.”

Noodle handed Shawn his computer back. He looked around at them, trying to remember when he'd been their age. Noodle realized he wasn't that much older than they were, but that Glitterfairy's death and Robot's deconstruction had aged his heart considerably; he felt very adult suddenly, very old. He hoped they wouldn't expect him to remember all their names. He said, “Well, if Band Manager set aside time for you, on today of all days, you must be some of DNGR's biggest fans.” He took a deep breath, then apologized, “I'm sorry the rest of the band couldn't be here to meet you. I'm sure G and Glitterfairy would have gotten on splendidly.”

“We aren't just here to geek out,” said G from her corner, defensively. “You aren't the only one who lost a best friend in Glitterfairy. We're here to help.”

“Help with what?”

“Help you catch Villain, of course!”

Shawn was very carefully scrolling through the camera-phone video of DNGR's final concert, frame by frame, and Eric was pulling out his smartphone and loading more of their evidence. Diane said, “As you're about to see, we think we've discovered the secret identity of Villain. Or, I mean, the person who Villain is a secret identity of.”

“I told you we should have just said alias,” sighed Bryce, “since we just mean there's one person operating under two names, and we know both of them. Neither is a secret identity.”

Eric slugged his little brother in the arm again and said, “It's a secret that he has another identity.” He held his phone out toward Noodle, showing the face of an incumbent mid-

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western senator who Noodle had seen but never really met. Then Eric swiped his thumb to switch to the next image, which was the same photograph, but with a curly mustache and a black top hat crudely drawn on. Shawn held up his laptop, with the clearest shot of Villain's attack frozen in full-screen, but Noodle didn't need to see the video to know that they were right. Without realizing he'd been asleep at all, Death Noodle had been dreaming of Villain's face almost continuously since his feet had left the ground to try to save his friends.

"I can't believe it took Eric's thumb to show me who Villain really is," said Noodle.

"Hey," replied Bryce, "I drew the mustache!"

Diane kept the others from all trying to take credit for solving the mystery, and asked Noodle plainly, "We know you're without your normal team, and while we may not be magical or from outer space, we'd like to help you thwart Villain's plans. How can we help DNCR save the Internet?"

"You can't help, and not because you're just kids," replied Noodle, angry that everyone expected him to save the day on his own. "You can't help because there is no DNCR, any more. There's just me, and I'm not going to be thwarting anything." Noodle was angry that everyone seemed to know Villain's plans but him, even while expecting him to be the one doing something about it. "I'll inform my UN contacts about the senator's secret identity, and if you've got any hard information about what he plans to do, I'll give that over to them, too. They'll be doing the thwarting, and we'll all be going to our respective homes."

All five children knew well the parental tone of finality in Death Noodle's voice, and they understood there would

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be no more questioning or bargaining from then on. Their faces melted at once to the deepest disappointment and sorrow they knew, and they pouted all the while they packed up their belongings to go.

Chapter Three

Death Noodle's anger was somewhat tempered when he discovered that his next meeting was with his UN contacts. Prepared with the kids' sketch and screengrab of Villain, and their notes on his nefarious plans, Noodle was escorted by Band Manager out of the church to a waiting black SUV. He climbed in the back to find himself alone, except for a driver separated from him by a bulletproof window. Noodle remembered the last time the UN had gone to this sort of trouble, he'd at least had Glitterfairy and Robot along to keep him company. The first SUV took him to a remote part of town where he was transferred to a second black SUV, again empty except for the driver. Noodle was not surprised when he switched vehicles a second time, inside an abandoned warehouse, but then realized his primary UN contact, Turk, was the driver of the third vehicle, and Noodle was thrown for a loop. Separated by thick glass forcing silence, Noodle simply waited to see where he'd end up, trying not to dwell on his anger.

Instead he told himself there would be others, people more qualified to track down Villain, to undo the treachery, and to locate the stolen components which Robot had apparently been relying on to survive. Noodle reassured him-

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self that the UN would know what to do. That they would have some sort of established procedure for handling an out-of-control US senator. The final leg of the journey was the longest, and when Turk finally pulled the vehicle to a stop, Noodle looked up to discover he'd been taken to the coast. He followed Turk over an embankment and down a slope of sand to where half a dozen men in perfectly-pressed black suits were standing uncomfortably near the sea. Most of them were stoic enough to ignore the salt water spritzing and sometimes lapping at their thousand-dollar shoes, their normal grim expressions apparently unchanged by any circumstance. Noodle would probably have kicked off his shoes and rolled up his pants if Glitterfairy and Robot had been along, but instead the irritation of the sand working its way into his shoes and socks was added to his growing anger.

Without waiting to hear what any of them had to say, Noodle held up his own smartphone and gave the gathered men the same show the kids had given, but with all three images to swipe between. He said, "We know who Villain is. Surely you, or someone you work with, has an idea of where the senator is? You can just go after him?" As soon as Noodle had seen the micro-nods of acknowledgment from their wrinkled faces, confirming that they could see Villain's dual-identity, he turned his phone back around and pulled up the information the kids had emailed him, handing it over to Turk to disseminate. "From what I've gathered, he's apparently got some plans to effectively destroy the Internet, using the component he stole from Robot. All the details I have are there. Do what you need to do to stop him."

"I'm glad to see you've been doing some legwork, Death Noodle," began Mr. Bristlethwaite, the unofficial chair of

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the UN's DNGR subcommittee, "but I'm afraid your role in this is not over with, yet."

"We understand that you may need additional support until you can rebuild your team," said Mr. Tuftworthy, a balding gentleman in round glasses, "and we're willing to extend a certain amount of courtesy to assist with your investigations and Villain's apprehension. Within budget, of course." Mr. Tuftworthy was in charge of appropriations for the subcommittee.

"I don't know what you expect me to do, guys," replied Noodle, "I'm just a noodle."

"That's not what you were saying last week, Death Noodle, or last month, or when we first had to form this subcommittee to give your otherwise rogue activities a little legal oversight. You've saved the world countless times. Saved strangers. You've avenged the deaths of the least among us, surely you'll do more, do your best, when your own friends' lives have been taken."

Noodle shook his head, unconsciously taking half a step backward and saying, "That was never just me. I'm not the one. It takes a team. It takes extraordinary people. Like Glitterfairy. Like Robot. Like all the friends we've made along the way, the people who have helped us because even just the three of us were never really enough to do it all. But now it's just me. It's time for you to call on someone else. I can't do it. I'm just a noodle."

"There isn't anyone else," said Mr. Bristlethwaite. "You're the ones with the expertise. Our best guys had no idea who Villain was. I just came from a meeting with a cyberwarfare oversight subcommittee, where the best minds in the world were furiously debating which country,

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organization, or terrorist cell might be behind the latest wave of unexplainable server failures. They have no idea, and you, Death Noodle, figured it all out. You weren't overcome by grief, or indulging in self-pity. You were investigating the situation as only DNGR can. We need you."

"There is no DNGR! DNGR died, alright? DNGR can't save you, DNGR can't help you, there is no DNGR any more."

"You didn't all die," said Turk, placing a comforting hand gently on Noodle's shoulder blade. "You're still with us, Noodle."

"Fat lot of good, I am."

"Look, Noodle, you gave us all this, didn't you?" said Turk, handing Noodle back his phone. "You've still got a brilliant investigative mind, and a passion to see justice done, right?"

"I didn't do any of that," admitted Noodle. "I got it from some kids. Some fans." Death Noodle took a deep breath. He turned his gaze downward, staring at the pale sand and black shoes. "If you want the truth, I have been wallowing in my grief. Until they dragged me out of bed for the funeral, I hadn't been out of my bed in three days. You and your best people have been working. My fans have been working. Even a few journalists knew Villain was trying to take down the Internet. All I did was curl up into a noodly ball and cry." He looked up, looked Mr. Bristlethwaite right in the eyes, and said, "I'm no hero, Mr. Bristlethwaite. I'm just a noodle."

The expression on Mr. Bristlethwaite's face tightened. Death Noodle was not looking forward to hearing his response. A long moment passed, and before either of them

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spoke again, another gentleman handed Mr. Bristlethwaite a tablet computer and whispered something into his ear. He looked at the display, tapped it a few times, then looked back to Death Noodle, saying, "Well, if you won't help us, you'll have to give us Robot."

"You know he didn't trust you to get your hands on his technology. There's no way I'm handing him over to you. You'd tear him to pieces, trying to figure out how he worked, and then you'd build weapons out of whatever you discovered. He would never have allowed it."

"Precisely," replied Mr. Bristlethwaite. "He never allowed us access to alien technology. He did everything he could to gather up every trace of alien or alien-derived technology from around the world, to keep his world from corrupting ours. You all did, so you're as culpable in this as he is, Death Noodle."

"Culpable in what?"

"Do I have to spell it out for you?" Mr. Bristlethwaite's disappointed, head-shaking sigh carried all the weight of several generations of paternal dissatisfaction, and Noodle couldn't help but feel the grim face of his own father staring back at him from under Mr. Bristlethwaite's skin. "There is no Earthly technology or magic capable of operating on fair footing with Robot's alien technology, just as Robot wanted it. Villain has stolen a key component of Robot's technology, and is using it for some nefarious scheme which threatens the utility and stability of the entire Internet. The only thing on Earth with even a chance of stopping Villain and saving the world is Robot, himself, and then only if enough of his technology can be understood in time. You'll have to hand him over to us, Death Noodle, or the collapse of civilization

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on Earth will be on your hands.”

“The collapse of civilization?”

“The Internet connects everything,” explained Mr. Tuftworthy. “We live in an information-based economy, now. Even the manufacture, transportation, pricing, and sales of physical goods requires a robust digital infrastructure. If the Internet was somehow switched off, there would be food scarcity within days, riots not long after, and pockets of starvation and open warfare throughout the western world within weeks. With an interruption in the global supply chain of any longer than three weeks, we project irreparable harm to the world’s economy and stability, roughly on the scale of the Dark Ages.”

“The Dark Ages,” repeated Noodle, rolling the idea around in his mind, trying to comprehend the scale of the guilt they were trying to level against him.

“Unless you,” continued Mr. Bristlethwaite, “with your personal and intimate knowledge of Robot and his technology, have some way of preventing Villain from accomplishing what he appears to be trying to do. As has been stated, we’re willing to offer an appropriate level of additional support in your efforts to apprehend Villain. The only alternative would be for us to direct those resources toward reverse-engineering Robot’s technology to develop something to combat his own stolen components. It’s up to you, Death Noodle.”

“I told you, I’m not handing him over to you.”

“So how can we assist you in your investigation?”

“I’m not doing any investigation, Bristlethwaite, but maybe. . .” Noodle was grasping at straws, trying to bargain when the whole world seemed to be hanging in the balance,

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trying not to violate the memory of his recently-deceased friends. He continued, "Maybe I could repair Robot, myself. If I could get him back online, maybe not a hundred percent, but able to communicate, then maybe Robot could tell you what to do, himself." Noodle kicked at the sand in frustration. "I mean, I'm just a noodle. I'm not an alien technical engineer. But you're right, I might be one of the only people left alive who knew Robot very well. Maybe if I can get his voice circuits working, or get his mind to log on to the Internet before Villain takes it down, we can get you the information you need, and the two of us can mourn the loss of Glitterfairy together." He looked from one old, suited man to another, and added, "In peace."

"We understand," said Turk, his arm still across Noodle's shoulders, "and once this Villain mess blows over, you'll be able to finally have some time to yourself."

"There will have to be limits, of course," said Mr. Bristlethwaite. "We know Villain is already at work. It's only a matter of time before he figures out Robot's technology and twists it to carry out his own sick plans. If you haven't got Robot communicating again by the time Villain takes the Internet down, we'll be forced to take him from you." He cleared his throat, adding, "In the interest of preserving civilization, of course."

Mr. Tuftworthy spoke up, asking, "Can you think of any immediate needs, for the repairs? So we can get started on the paperwork for fulfillment right away?"

"Unless you've been secretly hoarding a bunch of alien technology without informing DNGR, I can't imagine what you might have that would help me. I've got every piece of alien technology we've protected Earth from, held safely in

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Robot's quantum vault. If the tools I need aren't in there, and you aren't hiding them from me, there isn't any hope." Death Noodle shrugged off Turk's embrace, turned, and walked back toward the embankment. "Not that there's much hope to hold onto in that," he muttered. As he reached the top of the hill of sand, Noodle turned and shouted back at the cluster of rich, powerful old men, "I hope you prove me wrong."

"About what?" answered Turk, nodding to Mr. Bristlethwaite and hurrying after Noodle.

"I'm just a noodle. I have no business trying to save the world, alone."

Chapter Four

After a long, silent return drive, Turk dropped Death Noodle off at home. The sun was low in the summer sky by then, and Noodle was exhausted. As he walked up the steps to the wide front doors, he remembered when Glitterfairy had suggested they all get a place together, since they were together all the time on the road and their other adventures, anyway. Buying the mansion with the proceeds from their album sales had felt less ridiculous and ostentatious when it had been all three of them sharing the space. With the sound of his footsteps echoing in the emptiness of the huge place, Noodle couldn't help but be reminded that the entire mansion was now home only to himself, and he felt tiny within the vast spaces.

Noodle looked left, toward the East wing. Toward Glitterfairy's wing.

He looked away.

Noodle didn't know whether he'd ever be able to enter that part of his own home, again. He turned to his right, and began walking toward the West wing. Toward Robot's wing. Thinking of the impossible promise he'd made the subcommittee, under duress. He mumbled to himself, his low voice noodling its way into every nook and cranny of

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the byzantine architecture, “What sort of a choice is that, anyway?” Noodle grabbed the drumsticks from their tray and beat out the only drum riff he knew on the drum pad by the door, unlocking access to Robot’s wing of the house in a way only Robot could have thought of. “Betray your fallen friend, or betray the entire world?”

Robot’s part of the house was always somehow both a crowded, cluttered mess and an organized, sterile-looking environment. Noodle was sure Robot knew exactly what every little thing in there was, and precisely where to find it, but as he looked around the space in Robot’s absence Noodle realized he couldn’t have identified most of what he was looking at if he’d tried. Most of it was either inventions or art, as Robot liked to dabble in both areas, but Noodle was at a loss to determine which constructions and projects-in-progress had been intended as art and which had been Robot’s way of gradually bridging the gap between Earth and its inevitable future. He tried not to let his friend’s quirks and unfinished projects get to him as he made his way to Robot’s vault. Noodle reminded himself that he was a noodle with a mission. He was going to find a way to repair Robot. They were going to help the UN stop Villain. Then Robot’s unfinished work wouldn’t all be a lost cause, because Robot would still be around to finish them.

As Death Noodle approached Robot’s vault, the tiny collapsible ring detected his approach and his intent. It lifted into the air with no visible means of support, rotated so that its disc was perpendicular to the floor, and expanded in circumference until it was large enough for Noodle to step through without ducking. Noodle knew the vault used an advanced technology to identify him and to read his thoughts,

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and that no unauthorized person could ever access its contents or even activate it, but the automatic way it responded to his approach always made Noodle feel the vault was simply an open door anyone could step through and gain access to Robot's most valued possessions. The instant before he reached it, the vault snapped from having the appearance of a floating hula-hoop to that of a magic portal to another world, and Death Noodle stepped through.

Noodle looked around at the unending array of pedestals, shelves, drawers, and crates of things Robot had accumulated in his long life. The vault had automatically arranged the items Noodle was looking for so they were nearest to the vault's opening. Robot had tried to explain the quantum dynamics at work in creating, maintaining, and adjusting the pocket universe of the vault, but Noodle hadn't really understood. As his eyes wandered from one alien item to another, Noodle realized he hadn't ever really understood Robot's native technology at all. One item reminded him of the South American businessman who had tried to sell it as a fertility totem. Another device reminded him of the look on Glitterfairy's face as she'd barely managed to catch it amidst the debris of the exploding piñata factory. Each thing they'd found or confiscated since Robot had made his way to Earth had its own story in Noodle's mind, and all the stories were of the three of them, together.

None of the stories were about what a particular device might have done. Even when Robot had mentioned, offhandedly, what something had been used for where he'd come from, the idea had never really stuck with Death Noodle as much as the adventure the three of them had gone on to keep it away from Earthly influence. He wandered up and

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down the rows of strange devices on display in a daze, wondering whether he'd maybe just walked past the one alien device which would restore Robot to health. The futility of Noodle's search nearly reached the breaking point when he spotted a mirror-image of the U-shaped part of Villain's weapon, sitting in a bin of other seemingly random alien items.

For a long time Noodle stood and stared at it, remembering its near-twin flying through the air on an unstoppable trajectory toward his two friends. Then he put his hand on it, not wanting to hold it yet, just wanting to feel the cool metal under his long, noodly fingers. Death Noodle wondered about how such a small thing could bring such big changes, killing one friend, disabling another, and potentially leading to the collapse of civilization. He picked it up, still unused to the deceptive lightness of metals from Robot's home, and turned it over and over in his hands, examining the device he had trouble thinking of as anything other than nefarious. It seemed less complicated than the one Villain had used. It had fewer bits and bobs and tubes sticking out of it. Noodle tried to imagine what lengths Villain had gone to in adapting the alien technology to his self-centered needs, what blasphemies against a superior culture had been committed in the name of human politics and hubris.

Taking a deep breath, and taking the U-shaped device firmly in hand, Death Noodle turned and walked out of the vault with it, hoping it was possessed of some way to automatically reverse what its modified twin had done to Robot. The vault closed silently behind him, contracting and setting itself down where it belonged, appearing to be no larger or more interesting than a simple metal bracelet. Noodle paid

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it no mind, marching back across Robot's wing of the mansion, leaving Robot's door open as he passed into their communal space, and turning definitively toward his own wing of the house, the South wing, where Band Manager had said he'd left Robot.

To call Death Noodle's thinking room a lab was somewhat of an overstatement, as far as he was concerned. Unlike Robot, Noodle wasn't doing much real science, or inventing novel technologies to revolutionize the world. He referred to it as his thinking room, a place to go sort out clues, to study artifacts and history, to compose new music and build and test out new sorts of musical instruments and noisemakers. Noodle went to his thinking room when he needed to clear his head, and sometimes when his head felt too clear and he needed to fill it up with relevant data to help solve a case. Most of the technical equipment in the room was related to the creation and distortion of audio, to measuring, recording, amplifying, mixing, and otherwise manipulating sounds. Some was related to his other avocations, from archaeology to zoology, but as Robot's unmoving frame came into view, laid out on Noodle's big examining table, he realized there was little in his so-called lab which would be of use in restoring Robot to life.

As Noodle slowly approached Robot's lifeless form, the gaping cavity of his chest still stuck open in a silent scream, he held the U-shaped device out in front of him gingerly. He didn't know whether it might leap out of his hand toward his friend's body the way Villain's had so quickly homed in on its target, unstoppable. He didn't know whether the version in his hands was even active, or capable of being activated. When he was standing at Robot's side, it was clear

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the solution wouldn't be that easy. When Noodle tried lining the points of the device up with the corresponding rings on Robot's open chest, the only result was the slight sound of metal bumping up against metal. The sound fell flat in the echo-dampened room, a dead sound. The hollow clank resounded only in Noodle's own chest, feeling as emptied as Robot's had literally been.

Seeing it was of no use, Noodle set the alien device down beside Robot's lifeless body. He collapsed into his chair, lay his head down on Robot's body, and wept. "I'll do anything," he said, through his tears. "Just a little more time," Noodle pleaded, "and not just to save the world," he explained, trying to make a deal with the universe itself, "but because he deserves it. Robot deserves to live more than I ever have. He shouldn't be the one lying here. He didn't do anything wrong. Please, just a little more time. Give me a way to bring him back, and I'll do it. I'll do anything." For a while, Noodle just stayed there, weeping starchy tears across Robot's rustproof metal torso, begging for some insight, magic, or method to come to him which might save his friend. He'd been so focused on losing Glitterfairy since being roused for her funeral that the reality of Robot's demise had been held at arm's length—a distance brought to nothing as Noodle's long, thin arms wrapped around his cold, dead friend.

When Old Greybeard's clock chimed the sunset, Noodle sniffled, straightened, dried his eyes, and began doing everything he knew how. He measured for any sign of electrical activity in Robot's body, and found none. He pressed his head again to Robot's chest and listened for any sound of activity within, and heard none, so Noodle set up his most sensitive microphones and confirmed only that his own

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breath hadn't yet ceased, and his own pulse was the second-noisiest thing in the room. He probed Robot's chest cavity as cautiously and respectfully as he was able, but the opened chamber seemed to have been sealed off from the rest of Robot's body. All Noodle could discern was the negative space defined by where the missing component no longer was. He 3D-scanned the cavity, building a computer model of what the missing component couldn't have been bigger than, and printed out a full-scale replica of the shape with one of his 3D-printers. Noodle took the replica, along with the best images of the part being removed from Robot's chest at the concert, as captured by the audience's smartphone cameras, back to Robot's vault.

The vault knew what Noodle was looking for, but didn't have any way to tell him he wouldn't find it inside. Noodle spent a couple hours going through every alien item he could find, eventually digging through dozens of bins and drawers, comparing each item to the little plastic model and the blurry photographs with no success. There was no backup part in Robot's stores which Noodle could simply drop into Robot's chest and instantly save the day. Noodle felt his efforts had been wasted, that he really was as useless as he'd told the subcommittee, and as he methodically continued his search, his mood only sank lower and lower into the depths. He began to try to justify handing Robot over to the UN for study, so it wouldn't hurt so bad when it happened. His hands were still moving, but Noodle had already given up.

As he searched, Noodle began to realize that quite a few things seemed to be missing from the vault; parts and devices and components he remembered bringing home after some crazy adventure. With the numbness beginning to

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creep over his entire being again, Noodle assumed at first that he'd simply overlooked them as soon as he'd seen they wouldn't save his friend's life. Then, just before he reached the bottom of the final bin of odd devices, Noodle came across one which gave him another idea.

It was another small, alien thing Noodle knew nothing about the operation of, but which brought back memories of a particular challenge DNGR had overcome, and the new ally they'd gained in the process. He remembered Tinkerer, an old man of surprising wisdom and a knack for getting broken things working again. Noodle remembered, as he replaced all the items in that final bin of parts, that Robot had been spending a lot of time with Tinkerer, when the band wasn't on tour. As he walked again out of Robot's vault, Noodle recalled Tinkerer's surprising natural capability when working with devices from Robot's old home, and he thought he recalled Robot saying he trusted the old man enough to be teaching him how to fix the broken things from the beyond.

Noodle practically ran back to his lab, pausing only to slam the door to Robot's wing of the house shut, and began clearing off a gravity-canceling truck so he could get Robot's body across town by himself. One of the few alien technologies Robot had allowed outside the mansion, saying Earthly understanding of physics was a century away from reverse-engineering them, DNGR used their few gravity-canceling trucks primarily for hauling gear when they were on tour. Noodle now used one to haul Robot himself.

Noodle pulled an old, dirty drop-cloth over Robot's folded body, trying to give it the innocuous appearance of worthless, loose junk. Then he pulled his hoodie's hood up,

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obscuring his face in shadow, and pushed his friend's body out the back of the house, hoping to avoid any attention as they walked to Tinkerer's shop.

Chapter Five

With all of DNGR's local fans camped out at the amphitheater in vigil, Death Noodle went undetected as he walked the lonely streets that night, pushing his dead friend along ahead of him as though he were no more than a pile of old junk. Tinkerer's shop was in the oldest part of downtown, where the streets were narrow and the sidewalks were cracked and broken to the point they appeared to be little more than rubble arranged in a mosaic simulacrum of a civilized thoroughfare. If Noodle had been pushing a wheeled truck, it would have been an impossibly rough final mile. He thanked Robot silently for the high-tech assistance, for doing more than Noodle was able on his own, even in death.

A tiny bell rang against the door as Death Noodle pulled it open, and an uneven chunk of the broken sidewalk propped it open as he awkwardly maneuvered the truck through the narrow door and into the cluttered shop. Noodle had to yank at the door with considerable force to release it from the pavement's grip, causing the bell to clatter angrily in reply. Having only returned to Tinkerer's shop once or twice since their fateful initial meeting, Death Noodle stood awhile in awe of the menagerie of miscellany collected there.

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Unlike the things in Robot's collections, Noodle was easily able to recognize or identify most of those in Tinkerer's shop. Instead of being inscrutably alien, even the oldest and oddest things there had been dreamt, devised, designed, and assembled, used, misused, and abused, destroyed, disassembled, repaired, and augmented by Earthly minds and Earthly hands. It all made a certain sense to Noodle's Earthly mind. He could look at an antique, worn out, half-missing thing he'd never seen before, and intuit its function in a way things from Robot's home never laid themselves bare to him. The familiarity, even among so much that was unknown or foreign to him, comforted Noodle in a way nothing since the concert had been able.

Noodle wandered the shop at random, ignoring the upcoming challenge of having to navigate Robot's body through the narrow aisles of fragile, sometimes irreplaceable items, picking up the occasional odd thing, turning it over in his hands, and setting it down again. The feeling that Tinkerer had been able to take all these old, battered objects and find ways of returning them to life gave Noodle hope that a solution other than radical dissection might be possible.

When he reached Tinkerer's counter at the back of the store, Noodle was greeted by the wrinkled and worn old man, "I was sorry to hear about what happened to your friends the other day. I'm sure the depth of this world's loss at their passing is only matched by the depth of the pain in your heart right now, young Noodle." Tinkerer gripped the edge of the green visor he always wore, then nodded his balding head so he was tipping his hat with the same gesture. The wisps of white hair clinging to his pate shifted slightly with the movement, but seemed to settle again as soon as Tinkerer did. He

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looked up and into Noodle's eyes and asked, "Now what is it I might do to assist you, young friend?"

"It's Robot. We need to repair Robot."

Tinkerer adjusted the angle of the wire-frame glasses resting on his nose, bringing Death Noodle's face and eyes into sharp focus. He took a deep, deliberate breath. He said, "I'm not sure there's anyone on Earth who could fix that fellow, if he still requires repair after so long." Tinkerer took a long, slow, obvious look at the complicated time-keeper hanging over his work area, then continued, "It's been over three days since the incident, hasn't it?" Noodle nodded. Tinkerer shook his head. "Not sure there's anything to be done, then."

"I thought he'd been coming here, lately. Working with you. Teaching you how to work with the alien technologies, and how to repair them as easily as you've repaired all this. Hasn't he been here?"

"The two of us have been spending a bit of time together, yes, once in a while and again. But the lad hasn't shown me his inner workings any more than all that junk has been repaired. Some of it, sure, repaired at least in part, but most of what you see here is kept for spare parts. Spare parts coming in, to finish these, and spare parts coming out, to fix what folks bring in."

"But you two have been working together, right? He's told you about his home, and all that?"

"Oh, sure, Robot told me many a tale as we whiled away the hours. A right pleasant storyteller he was, once he warmed up a bit." Tinkerer was looking off into the middle distance, as though he could hear Robot's stories in his mind's ear just then. "And sure, we worked, but not the way

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you're thinking." His eyes focused on Noodle again, and Tinkerer declared, "Matter of fact, most every working thing in this shop right now was repaired while he was here jaw-wagging with me. The two of us got a surprising amount of work done, with all that talking going on. Robot never seemed to tire of working with his hands, or of bringing true restoration to what had seemed like lost causes. A good man gone, he."

"That's just it, Tinkerer. He's not gone, yet. He's just inside your door, and he's waiting to be restored." Noodle pointed the way he'd come in, and Tinkerer's eyes followed. When they settled on the cloth-covered heap and the gravity-canceling truck, the truck retracted its handle, lifted high enough into the air to clear all the clutter and shelves, and floated gracefully to the back of the shop. Tinkerer stood and followed it into his back room where the truck waited until Tinkerer's work table had been cleared of other projects before lowering itself onto it. Noodle asked, "How did you do that?"

Tinkerer laughed, saying, "That? Same as any other device from Robot's home, those trucks are designed to connect to the mind of their users, to ease control. He always told me it was part of their minimalist design aesthetic. That they'd refined and refined their user interfaces until one day they'd disappeared entirely. From hundreds of controls, to a few controls, to the sort of single-control interface we see Earthly touch-based phones and computers moving toward, and then they crossed that final threshold and created devices which understand the user's intent. I haven't even the equipment here to begin to study the implementation, or to understand how their software is just as capable of parsing my

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alien thoughts as it would those of its creators, but Robot's guidance showed me at least how to take advantage of the capability." Tinkerer cocked his head to the side, curiously, asking, "He didn't explain all this to you, too?"

Noodle shook his head, wondering whether Robot had really left him in the dark about the alien technologies, or whether his own failure to pay attention had created the lapse. "I pushed that thing the whole way here, by hand. I didn't know. I mean, I've worked with things like the vault and the deliciousity waterfall, of course, but I guess I've never intentionally taken control. When they were reading my mind, it was all automatic."

"Oh, that Robot was such a joker," replied Tinkerer. "At first I didn't believe he'd retuned the waterfall before the Prince could finish the chariot-ride. Then he showed me the scars and the holovids to prove it. The audacity! But he always knew how to smooth things over after a prank like that, didn't he?"

Noodle was beginning to realize that Robot had been opening up to Tinkerer in a way Robot had never yet done with himself. He said quietly, "I don't think I've heard that one, actually," and felt more tears welling up in his eyes as he looked at the lifeless heap on the work table, Robot's true form as obscured by the drop cloth as his funny stories about home had apparently been obscured from Noodle's view.

Tinkerer pulled the drop cloth away, then gently rearranged Robot's limbs into a more natural pose. Once more he was returned to the shape of a human corpse. Once more his gaping chest screamed silently skyward. Tinkerer looked Robot's body over thoroughly, smiling as he fingered a pair of gashes in the metal of his hindquarters which Noodle now

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assumed must relate somehow to the story he'd never heard about the Prince he hadn't known existed. Noodle had never thought to ask what had bit Robot on the butt, and now there was a chance he'd never find out. After an examination more exhaustive than Noodle'd had the presence of mind to give, Tinkerer shook his head and said, "Everything appears to be intact, save the obvious. I've been doing my darnedest to communicate to his hardware my intent to have him wake up, or begin repairs, or otherwise respond in some way, but he doesn't seem to be responding."

"You were able to communicate with him mentally, before?"

"Never tried before, to be honest. He wasn't just some truck to push around, so I never tried to give him a mental shove, as it were."

"So what's next? If mental commands aren't working, there must be some sort of direct method for communicating with what's left of him. The stolen component wasn't Robot's brain, was it?"

Tinkerer put his hand to his chin and pondered the question a moment before answering, "I don't rightly know. I don't suppose a being like Robot is possessed of a direct analogue to an Earthling's grey matter, though it's possible the missing piece played a central role in maintaining his consciousness. He seemed to know a lot more about the mind than anyone on Earth has yet discovered, but he certainly never revealed the secrets behind his own mind's particular method of manifestation. What he did mention was redundancies, which is why I don't think such a small, easily-removed component could have been the true seat of Robot's consciousness."

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“You mean, you think you can repair him? That Robot’s still in there, somewhere?”

Tinkerer rapped his bony knuckles hard against the layered metal of Robot’s chest, producing a sound nearly as dead as Noodle had heard in his acoustically-dampened thinking room. “Impossible to say,” he said, “though I’d bet more on Robot’s technology being more clever than a man with a gun than I’d bet on my ability to successfully repair this fellow. We talked a lot, and Robot showed me a few tricks, explained a little about the limits his society had been bumping up against, technologically, and we learned a lot from each other as we fooled around with all the tech and toys I make it my business to play with, but Robot never told me how to build another Robot. How to repair a broken Robot. If he were full of springs and gears and other clockwork, the sort of things my grizzled hands have come to understand, maybe. If his circuits ran on electricity, bits, and bytes, and if replacement parts could be bought by the bin-full at the local bazaar, almost certainly.” Tinkerer moved his hand from Robot’s chest to Noodle’s narrow shoulder, looked at him sympathetically, and said, “But that’s not how his technology works. As far as I know, the only thing which can repair Robot’s alien technology is more alien technology. The way he explained it to me, he was self-repairing, but the repairs weren’t automatic. That’s how he was able to keep those scars; he never directed his rear end to completely restore itself. Whether the agents of repair are nano-scale machines, quantum dynamics, or something further beyond Earthly ken, I couldn’t say. All I know is that if he hasn’t started repairing himself by now, he probably never will. I’d guess Villain did more than simply steal this piece of him. A

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repair of this scale should take seconds, possibly minutes, but certainly not days. There must be a software corruption, some sort of broken connection, somewhere deep inside what's left of him."

"So that's it, then? I don't know how to repair him, you don't know how to repair him, and he isn't repairing himself? Civilization is about to collapse, and there's nothing we can do about it." Death Noodle's hood was still up, and as he drew into himself, into the shadow of the hood, he looked more like his father than Tinkerer had ever seen. An uncontrollable shiver slipped, cold, down Tinkerer's spine, and his hand fell away from Death Noodle's shoulder. Noodle continued, "It's over, and I've been useless. I couldn't save the world if I tried. I couldn't save one person. Not one. All the powers of Death and the underworld, here at my fingertips, and it doesn't mean a thing. I can't bring someone back from the dead. I couldn't stop Villain from killing them. All I'm good for is taking life, and standing by while the lives of my friends are taken in turn." Death Noodle's hand was clenching and unclenching, and he could feel the shaft of wood trying to press through the aether into his grip. "Perhaps it's all for the best. Glitterfairly is dead. Robot is dead. In a few weeks, the whole world will come crashing down after them. Perhaps it really is time to do my part to help in my father's work, just when he's needed the most."

Tinkerer felt the temperature of the air in the room dropping rapidly, and was beginning to think he saw an eight-foot scythe in Noodle's hand. He interrupted Noodle's proclamations of doom, saying honestly, "Of course that isn't it, my young Noodle. That's no way to begin an adventure. You're giving up before we've really begun. Just because we

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haven't any idea how we'll overcome the challenges ahead, no plan of attack, no relevant equipment, and little hope of success, it doesn't mean we shouldn't try. What fun would it be to know everything in advance?" Tinkerer began moving rapidly around his work area as he spoke, grabbing tools and assembling them like a surgeon's next to Robot's lifeless form. His eyes kept darting back to Noodle's hand, and were reassured every time they didn't see a scythe there. Tinkerer continued, "Of course we go ahead. We try anyway. We try everything. We don't give up until either the challenge is overcome, or we're both seeing your father face to face. Don't think of it as a lost cause, little Noodle, look at yourself as a pioneer, exploring the unknown possibilities of your own future success."

Noodle watched the old man for a moment, marveling at the spry way he suddenly seemed able to move as he gathered the tools of his trade, then Noodle lowered his head into his hand. He still felt hopeless, but just as hand-checking every last alien item in Robot's vault had been better than handing him over to the UN, he saw that simply trying, that doing anything at all instead of nothing at all, was better than giving in to the depression trying to consume him. Noodle sniffled, wiped his eyes, then pushed the hood back off his head and looked up, ready to work through the pain rather than succumbing. Almost ready to hope again.

Chapter Six

Death Noodle watched expectantly and at the ready, should Tinkerer ask for help, wondering whether the old man were merely pacifying him by making a fruitless effort. The old man moved with surprising vigor, once his tools were in his hands and an unsolved problem had been stretched out before him. Noodle tried to stay out of his way, and to keep up with Tinkerer's progress. Tinkerer began with a series of probes, at first similar to those Noodle had used, then of increasing unfamiliarity to his inexperienced mind. To Noodle's surprise, Tinkerer also seemed to be methodically probing the gravity-canceling truck and his own wooden work table with each of his tools. Noodle was beginning to wonder whether it was some sort of obsessive-compulsive behavior when Tinkerer explained, "The table is our control. It is neither alien nor active, and its expected responses are well documented. The truck gives us a second point of comparison, so we aren't only looking at the differences between Robot and a table, but between two alien devices in different states of repair. So far, Robot and the truck show no statistically significant—" Tinkerer's voice paused, but his hands and his eyes kept working, verifying the readings before saying, "So far, we've discovered one

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statistically significant difference between the readings from Robot and the truck.”

Tinkerer continued working. He waved devices up and down the length of Robot’s body. He had the truck dump Robot on the table and move to the other side of the room, then waved the devices along Robot’s body again, making small sounds of delight as he did. Tinkerer seemed to begin all his measurements again with a glee Noodle had never seen from someone in their discovery that they’d made a mistake and must begin all their efforts again from the start. The second time through, Noodle at least knew what order Tinkerer would be cycling through his probes in, and was able to have each next tool ready just as it was required. Once in a while, Tinkerer would excitedly exclaim the next higher number, first “Two!” and “Three!” then later refining and adjusting his measurements until instead of a small number of differences, Tinkerer had painted for himself a clear picture of the measurable differences between the table, the truck and Robot’s seemingly-inert body.

“I think I have a . . .” began Tinkerer, then he wandered into the front of the shop and began rummaging through his merchandise. “Here it is,” he declared, and returned with a small object in his hand.

“What is it?” The object seemed to want to play tricks on Noodle’s eyes. When he looked at it from some angles, it looked as Earthly as anything else in the front of the shop, and he could nearly guess what it might be used for. When he saw it from other angles, or when the harsh work lights reflected off it in just the wrong ways, Noodle was sure the object must have come from Robot’s home, and that it belonged in Robot’s vault. Tinkerer seemed to know just what

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it was, and he was adjusting it carefully with a tiny screwdriver, while looking at it through a large magnifying lens.

“This was meant to be a simple WiFi adapter. It was one of the first projects Robot worked on, here, and he nearly insisted that I throw it away. Said he’d made a mistake.” Tinkerer finished his adjustments and, instead of taking it to Robot, he went to where the truck was silently hovering. “I asked him if it would work, and his answer was ‘Yes, but. . .’, so I explained to him that nothing which performs its intended function is worthless, and nothing which can be repaired or adapted to perform a new function is garbage. Explained my life to him, in the process. My life’s work.” By some invisible act of will Noodle wished he knew how to exert, himself, Tinkerer caused the truck to open a small access port on its side. There was a sort of female jack there, and the object was already fitted with the corresponding male plug; Tinkerer plugged the object into the truck. “He tried to explain that he’d accidentally let his hands get away from him, that he’d done too good a job on the repair, and that this little WiFi adapter was capable of adapting to nearly the full range of alien network technologies in addition to simple 802.11 a, b, g, and n. At the time I didn’t absorb everything he was telling me, but if Robot did what he said he did, I think I’ve found us a way in.”

“A way in to the truck?” Noodle didn’t really understand, except that Tinkerer had possessed alien technology that might be able to help. Technology which had been waiting, forgotten in the shop where anyone could have walked off with it, since Robot had first met Tinkerer. “Are you using the truck as a control, to be sure it doesn’t fry Robot’s circuits?”

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“No, but that would have been a good idea,” replied Tinkerer, sitting down before his huge computer screen. “I’ll try to keep that in mind for later.” Noodle wasn’t much into computers for their own sake, so the text interfaces Tinkerer was typing furiously into seemed as foreign to him as a tablet covered in cuneiform would probably have been to the old man. Noodle had to rely on Tinkerer’s explanations in order to keep up with his progress. Tinkerer explained, “It’s working. I’m able to access the truck’s systems directly, via the WiFi adapter. It’s all open to me, because it’s reading my mind and knows what I want, which right now is full access.” His hands were typing faster than he was speaking. “Here’s the diagnostic routines,” he began, and the truck clattered to the floor, wobbled unsteadily, then rose again to its former position, whereupon Tinkerer continued, “and there’s all the diagnostic data about the truck.”

The data on the screen was indecipherable to Death Noodle. He nodded, saying, “Okay. Now what about Robot?”

“Give me a moment,” Tinkerer replied, looking back and forth between the computer screen and Robot’s inert form, “I’m working on that.” Noodle waited, following Tinkerer’s gaze, back and forth, back and forth. Then Tinkerer said, “I’ve now got a sort of second-hand access to Robot’s systems, by tunneling through the truck’s alien network protocols. I’m running diagnostics on Robot’s systems. . . Now.” They both turned to look Robot’s direction, but saw no change. After a long and disappointing moment, Tinkerer turned back to his computer and read the results. There was a lot more information than had come from the truck’s limited systems, and it took him a while to understand all he

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was seeing.

Noodle asked impatiently, "What does it say? Can Robot be repaired?"

"Not with what we have here," said Tinkerer, in dismay. "It seems that the stolen component was responsible for Robot's self-repairing capabilities, among its many functions. In addition to being a key hardware component in the active manifestation of the self, it stored the software which controls the repairs, and it stored the key template data about Robot's last-known optimal condition. The rest of Robot's software, while relatively intact, effectively represents 'everything but Robot himself', unless this component is restored. The redundancies in Robot's self-repair system were designed on the assumption of a robust, ubiquitous data network—the alien equivalent to our Internet, except it was faster and deeper and stronger in ways Robot was never adequately able to explain." He pointed to something on the screen which looked like fake math to Noodle and said, "According to this, the stolen component should be able to make any repair to Robot, even when it isn't installed, as long as it's able to connect to Robot's body over the network." Tinkerer turned back to Noodle and said, "The problem is, there is no network. At least, not the sort of network Robot's systems require."

"What about a local network, like between Robot and the truck? We may not have an interstellar data network based on quantum entanglement, or whatever they had, but if we got Robot's body in the vicinity of the stolen part, would that work?"

Tinkerer began paging through the data on Robot's built-in networking hardware, asking, "Do you know where

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Villain is? If it's as easy as that to get to him, couldn't you just recover the missing piece?"

"I . . . I don't know, no," said Noodle with a sigh. "Any idea what the range on Robot's local networking might be? Maybe it's good enough we just have to get him within a couple hundred miles?"

Tinkerer shook his head, explaining, "The bandwidth available appears to be inversely proportional to the distance between nodes. For the same reasons our Earthly networks couldn't handle the data requirements of carrying out a repair, Robot's body would have to be within a few hundred feet of the component to fix itself."

"I guess that makes it a sort of chicken and egg problem. If we knew where Villain was, we could take Robot there and he'd fix himself, but if we knew where Villain was, we could just go recover the stolen component, and simply put it back where it belongs."

"You're assuming Villain hasn't been spending the last three days modifying the thing." Tinkerer turned back around and pulled up a few new windows, showing Noodle more data which meant nothing to him. "It's obvious that he's doing the opposite. He's manipulating alien technology to try to control the Internet. If you look here, and here," he said, pointing, "you can see the difference between his old software attacks and the new way servers are collapsing. So far, Villain doesn't seem to have been able to keep Robot's stolen component doing what he wants for more than a few milliseconds at a time. It's just a matter of diabolical persistence before he irreversibly corrupts it, taking the Internet down with it. Once that happens, Robot's ability to repair himself will probably be lost for good." He paused a mo-

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ment, hit a few keys, then said, “Hmm. That’s interesting. Expected, but interesting nonetheless.”

“What is it? Something that could help?”

“Probably not. It appears that, while Villain hasn’t been able to get Robot’s missing piece to overthrow the Internet, he has at least got it adapted to our network and persistently online.” Tinkerer pulled up a graph showing network activity across his own system, and explained, “As soon as I’d tunneled from this system into Robot’s, he and the stolen component began ping-pong-ing one another, then attempting to carry out a repair across the Internet.”

“Which you said it couldn’t do.”

“It can’t. But just as we didn’t let our lack of experience, equipment, and a meaningful plan stand in the way of our giving things a try, Robot is trying everything he can to be made whole again, albeit in a totally automated, non-conscious way. You can see, here, that Robot’s body has been focusing futilely for the last several minutes on tracking down the physical location these pings are coming from, even though it fully comprehends the alien technology being used to make that impossible. It’s like watching a giant continue to try squeezing water from a stone after the trick with the cheese is explained.”

“So we can’t repair Robot over the Internet, we can’t repair him without the part Villain stole, and if we wait too long, Villain will have corrupted its data beyond the point of usefulness. Plus, you’re telling me that nothing, not even Robot’s own body, full of alien technology, can track down Villain so we can get the part back before it’s too late.” Noodle sighed. “Are we back to giving up hope, or do you want to poke around in Robot’s brain a while longer?”

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“The only other way to save Robot would require that he made regular backups, including backups of the backup data stored in the stolen component. If we had that, we could simply inject a copy of the data and software normally stored in that component directly into the systems of Robot’s body, and Robot would be up and running, like new within seconds.”

“Do you think he had a backup? What would it look like? Would you know it if you saw it?” Noodle’s mind was scouring his memories, trying to remember some instance he’d seen or heard of Robot doing something like backing himself up. Some time they were on the road, or maybe right after they got home again, but the memory wasn’t there.

Tinkerer confirmed, “There isn’t any backup. I was only speculating about potential solutions. Brainstorming in the hopes it would lead to something useful. Robot would never have intentionally made any backup copies of himself.” Tinkerer turned away from his computer, took a deep breath, and explained, “Robot’s society long ago agreed that any copy made of a conscious being should be extended the same rights and privileges as any other conscious being would be afforded. A backup is not just a pile of data, as far as Robot was concerned. Creating a backup copy of himself would be roughly akin to begetting a child, a clone, a new life not under his own control, but still a part of his responsibility. A backup copy stored, inert, within some form of external data device, would be ethically comparable to holding someone prisoner within a tiny cell, unable to move, or to make decisions, or really to live at all. If that backup copy were overwritten with a new copy, with updated data, as we handle data for computers like this one,” he said, gesturing

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to the computer he'd been working at, "Robot would consider that an act of murder, committed only so you could imprison another new person from the moment of their creation. I apologize for mentioning it. I guess I'd assumed you'd been familiar with his position on the subject. It was one we'd debated at length, more than once."

"I don't know why he never mentioned it," said Noodle, feeling ever more alienated from Robot, "especially after the Crystal Unicorn ordeal. I'd have thought he'd be more bothered by what happened, and want to talk to Glitterfairy and I about what it all meant to him."

"Aha!" Tinkerer exclaimed, turning suddenly back to his computer and typing with alacrity as he spoke excitedly, "I'd forgotten about the Crystal Unicorn! This could be our big opportunity. Let me see if I can just. . ." Noodle suddenly felt a little light-headed, and put his hand on the back of Tinkerer's chair for support. "Perfect," continued Tinkerer, not looking up from the keyboard as he designed a new interface protocol and explained his new idea, "we can use Robot's mind-reading technology to tunnel into your mind, too, Noodle. It isn't exactly safe, but it may be the only option we've got."

"Are you typing," began Death Noodle, feeling woozy, "into my brain?" Noodle lost his grip on the back of Tinkerer's chair and nearly toppled over. He caught himself on the edge of the computer desk just in time, and lowered himself gently to his knees. Remembering what had happened to the truck, Noodle looked up at Tinkerer, drooling a little, and pleaded, "Please don't run a diagnostic on me." He couldn't help but slur the word 'diagnostic'.

Tinkerer finally seemed to notice what was happening

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to Death Noodle, and froze. His eyes turned before his head, looking down instead of up at the normally-towering young man, and his hands remained frozen at the keys. Noodle's breathing returned to normal, and he was able to wipe the drool off his chin with one hand without losing his balance again. Tinkerer said, "Maybe it's not an option, after all."

As Noodle's head cleared, Tinkerer's fingers no longer clacking away at the keyboard, he realized what Tinkerer had been after. He said, "You were going after the copy, weren't you?" Tinkerer nodded, watching Noodle's face carefully for any further signs of stroke. Noodle continued, "But Crystal Unicorn said the copies were locked away, in a way only she and Robot knew how to unlock. I don't think you're a good enough hacker to break Crystal Unicorn's lock. Do you? I mean, without breaking the rest of my mind in the process?"

Tinkerer's head shake was definitive, and accompanied by an, "Apparently not, no." Seeing the work of his hands go from tinkering with technology to potentially harming a living being, Tinkerer was instantly sobered. All his sprightly energy seemed drained away, and his mode of speaking shifted right along with him. Gingerly assisting Noodle to his feet, Tinkerer said, "You're not the first cat my curiosity has so grievously threatened, young Noodle, and by my age I ought to know better than to put the blameless in harm's way just to solve some puzzle. I most sincerely apologize for my overenthusiastic approach." He led Noodle over to a long, low couch, and offered, "Why don't you lie down for a piece while I go brew us a cuppa tea? Only seems right we take a slow moment just about now, to really turn things over in our minds." Noodle gladly lowered himself onto the

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couch, and Tinkerer fussed over a monstrosity of an electric kettle he'd been fixing with mismatched parts for as many decades as electricity had heated water for tea, saying, "I suspect we've discovered the key to resolving our primary challenge, Noodle my friend, and now only need to find an appropriate approach to snatch up that key and unlock our dear friend Robot from his slumber."

Chapter Seven

The kettle was a lot like Tinkerer, in that when pressed into service it proved to be faster and more energetic than first appearances would lead the casual eye to believe, and it wasn't long before the tea was steeping in the pot and Tinkerer was silently staring at the rising steam. When the time came to pour out the two cups of rich white tea, Tinkerer asked, "You say Robot would have been able to access the copy?"

"That's what I was told," replied Death Noodle, sitting up somewhat so he could take the offered teacup, "which doesn't do us a lot of good, really. It's just another catch-22. If Robot were alive, he could open up the part of my mind where there might still be an old copy of him which we could use to bring Robot back to life. It's like needing Robot alive to find and defeat Villain while needing to find and defeat Villain to repair Robot. It's like this whole night has been."

"There's a chance here we don't need Robot quite fully alive to unlock the copy trapped within you, my boy. You saw how diligently Robot's automated routines were working to find a way to route around the problems they encountered. What if we could redirect those automated systems?" Tinkerer paused thoughtfully, taking a measured sip of his tea,

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then suggested, "If we could turn their focus toward the holographic crystal prison in your mind, which may well prove to be harboring the very software it needs, and away from the physical, but now impossible-to-reach component stolen from Robot's chest, perhaps what remains of Robot will be able to unlock the key to its own restoration."

"I don't know," admitted Noodle. "Maybe?" He shrugged his noodly shoulders and added, "We may as well try it. Even if we end up scrambling my mind in the attempt, it'll still be less difficult than attempting to make contact with Crystal Unicorn again." Death Noodle blew across his tea, waiting for it to cool a little more before he drank, then said, "Not to mention how much less dangerous it would be to fail in restoring Robot, compared to succeeding in bringing Crystal Unicorn back to this version of reality. The worst-case scenario of one is just the collapse of civilization on Earth for a century or two, but I'm sure Robot explained what might happen if Crystal Unicorn were in our compressed, ten-dimensional universe during one of her unstable molting stages."

"Or worse," joked Tinkerer, "if one of Glitterfairy's clurichaun cousins got her drunk enough to let them follow her home."

"They did their best, and she drank the lot of them under the table. I doubt their plan would ever have worked." Noodle laughed at the memory, then tried to hold on to it, to keep it from getting crowded out by the feeling that he'd never really feel at home around Glitterfairy's family, again. He tried to hold on to that split second of feeling anything other than terrible. "Do you suppose she was telling the truth about the wine in her reality? They might have felt

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more at home on her side than on ours.”

“Or they might have been just as dangerous to her universe as she was to ours.” Tinkerer shrugged. “Of course, without the worst of that ordeal, we’d still be at a loss for how to proceed in our current misadventures. In the grand scheme of things, perhaps we are about to discover that her small missteps here were preordained to save us from our misfortunes, now. And I think I know how we can set about such a course without turning your brain into an overcooked omelette.”

“I appreciate that, but if my life must also be sacrificed to save Robot’s, so he can save the world, it would be worth it.” Imagining the course his life seemed to be headed toward, with or without the world, Noodle added, “What have I got left to lose?”

Drinking down the last of his cup of tea just as Noodle was beginning his own, Tinkerer replied, “It is my sincerest hope that no one else need be sacrificed for the sake of Villain’s machinations, and while I have a few outstanding concerns regarding your chances of success, I would like to suggest: You hack your own mind. My attempts were too crude, too direct. I don’t know my way around, in there; you’re the expert, you lead the way. Show Robot’s body where to find Robot’s mind hidden within your own mind, Noodle, and then that copy should be able to control the construction of a replacement component, post haste. Got it?”

“I couldn’t follow what you were doing with your computer, at all, Tinkerer. I don’t know the first thing about hacking. I’d probably delete my ability to type, first, then fall face-first on the keyboard and faceroll more damage in the process. It certainly didn’t feel safe when you were in my

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head, mucking about, but you've got to be better at it than me."

"No, no, going in with Earthly tools is a fool's game, I'm afraid, and I was a fool to attempt it. You'll be hacking your own mind with all the grace of Robot's software-interfacing skills, which I'm sure we both agree represent a formidable step up from either of our capabilities." Tinkerer stood and crossed back to his computer, saying, "Please, stay reclined for now," as his hands began their typing again, beginning slowly and gradually returning to their earlier, frenetic pace. This time, after the initial light-headedness had passed, Noodle didn't feel anything unusual happening in his mind or body as Tinkerer worked. "What I'm attempting to do is dangerous. It could burn out your brain faster than my manual foray therein. If it works and you get in, you may discover that the copy you seek no longer exists, or that Robot's automated routines are unable to unlock it. If we tarry too long, and Villain succeeds before you find what you're looking for, I wouldn't be surprised if your mind was wiped as clean as the servers he's been attacking."

Noodle rebuffed Tinkerer's warnings, saying, "I've already volunteered my life, and I've really nothing left to lose, so stop trying to talk me out of it. Just tell me what to do."

Tinkerer was back in his full-bore tinkering mindset, his fingers a blur of motion as he prepared the digital house of cards they would rely on in their quest to save their friend, and thereby the world. He said, "So we have Robot's body connected to your mind directly, and to the truck's systems via a local area alien network, which is using the WiFi adapter Robot over-repaired to bridge with my computers, alright?" Noodle nodded, sipping his rapidly cooling tea and

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hoping he wouldn't forget something important when it was too late to adapt. "And Robot's automated systems have tunneled back across that bridge to reach the Internet, where it and its missing piece are pinging each other like crazy, but without being able to tell each other where they actually are." Noodle was following along, so far. "And what we need to do is to trick Robot's automated systems into accessing the salvageable copy we hope exists somewhere in your mind of Robot's self-repair systems and restoration templates."

"It sounds easy enough."

"It would be, if I could find anything remotely resembling a copy of Robot, or a partial copy, or even an encrypted chunk of data large enough to contain a copy of Robot, anywhere in your mind."

"It isn't there? Maybe Robot, or Crystal Unicorn, managed to find a way to remove the copies."

"Or maybe the residual effects of overexposure to higher-order trans-dimensional information matrices within a compressed, lower-order space-time aren't as obvious as their description would imply, when blended together with the rest of a noodle's thoughts." Tinkerer stopped himself, aware he was becoming inappropriately ornery, and tried to reply more civilly, "Most likely, whatever method was used to lock the copies up and hide them from you was well-enough designed that they're hidden from Robot, too. As strongly as I know he feels about copied consciousnesses, I wouldn't be surprised if he'd asked Crystal Unicorn to obfuscate the copies' very existence, even from his depths of perception."

"So if you can't find the copy, and Robot's systems can't find the copy, how am I supposed to find the copy?"

"That's what I'm working on, right now. You might feel

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a little tingle in your extremities while I iron out the wrinkles in the mapping algorithm.”

Noodle could definitely feel something happening. “You’re mapping my brain? To find the copies?”

“No. I’m allowing the algorithm Robot uses to maintain a live map of the entire Internet to have a go at mapping your mind, but I’ve informed it that everything in your mind constituted a set of meta-information about everything on the Internet, so you won’t have to try to find the weak, self-deleting ping which is hiding its own location. Instead you’ll just have to find the strong, persistent ping which is hiding its own location.”

Noodle had the sensation of every emotion he’d ever felt switching on and then off again, one after the other in alphabetical order, for a tiny fraction of a second each. He shuddered, sinking into the couch’s soft cushions and doing his best to set the teacup aside without spilling the remaining cold tea. He asked, “What ping, now?”

“There seems to be a third alien ping,” explained Tinkerer as he continued typing. “When Robot’s systems ping for their missing piece, before the missing piece’s ping can reach us, an incomplete ping surfaces briefly from the depths of your mind and then deletes itself before anything useful can be done. Or maybe it’s some sort of digital reflection of the real responding ping, bouncing forward just a little faster than its source. The whole thing takes place in the milliseconds it takes for the missing piece’s ping to cross the net, and its strong ping distracts Robot’s systems from the very existence of your mind, so it’s really hard to be sure what’s going on.”

“And you think this third ping, the one which comes

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second, being the first to respond, is coming from the locked-up copy of the corresponding piece of Robot's software, somewhere within me?" Noodle's own words seemed to be adding to the increasing sensations of disorientation coming over him. "But I won't have to try to find that one?"

"It worked. I don't know whether this means the Internet was smaller than I thought, or your mind is much more complex than I'd imagined, but it worked. Now we can send you in." Tinkerer turned around again to face Death Noodle, and said, "Every single thing on the Internet now corresponds directly with something specific in your mind, Noodle, and every single thing in your mind is now related in some way with a particular thing on the Internet. At least as far as Robot's networking systems are concerned, you're now a form of external storage for metadata about the Internet."

"But, why?" Noodle was beginning to wonder what an out-of-body experience felt like, because he had the distinct impression he was somehow separating from himself, as he tried to stay focused on Tinkerer's explanations and instructions.

"The only real reason to do the mapping was so that the ping in you would correspond exactly with the ping from the stolen component. Now all you need to do is go online, locate the origin of those loud pings, and once you're sure you've found the right place and connect there you ought to be able to use Robot's directives to disconnect yourself from the Internet, after which you should find yourself looking at the secret copies. Easy, right?" Tinkerer didn't give Noodle a chance to respond, but Noodle wasn't about to try controlling his own lips or lungs; they felt as though they were

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miles away from him. His whole body felt somehow distant, though Noodle could see that he hadn't moved from the couch. Tinkerer's voice had been growing more and more distant, coming less and less clearly and more as though echoed from some unseen source. "You should be headed right into the heart of Villain's online presence. That's where he'll be orchestrating the implementation of his plans from, and that's where you've got to be to locate the copies. Just lead Robot's systems there, disconnect from the net, and hopefully they'll take care of the rest."

Noodle tried to say, "You haven't told me how to trick Robot's systems into looking where I want them to, instead of where they want to," and he didn't know whether he'd been successful. The sound of his own voice in his ears reminded him of a didgeridoo choking on long squid tentacles. He hoped it sounded more like words to Tinkerer.

"I suppose that means Robot's systems have accepted your new disguise," said Tinkerer in reply to Noodle's incoherent slurping sounds. "If everything has worked according to the specifications, you ought to be experiencing the world the same way Robot does. Or, at least the way he would if he was experiencing the world through the poor inputs of biology, rather than the precisely-calibrated sensors he actually has." The world had become a blurry, noisy, incomprehensibly-unfiltered experience for Noodle, and it took all his effort to process a fraction of the meaning out of the vibration patterns Tinkerer continued to emanate, saying, "You should be able to feel at least one new sensation, Noodle. I don't know how to describe it, but you ought to be able to feel the Internet. Try to focus on that feeling, Noodle. Concentrate on it, and you should begin to—"

Chapter Eight

“Is this how Robot experiences the Internet?” wondered Noodle aloud. He was surprised to be able to speak, and to hear his own voice, since Noodle was immediately aware he wasn’t surrounded by air, or breathing. He looked down at himself and assumed he was looking at what the film *The Matrix* had described as a residual self image; as far as Death Noodle could discern, he was still inhabiting his own, physical body despite clearly being within a virtual environment. Noodle looked around and was able to identify the elements of his local area immediately, with Robot’s body’s systems translating everything automatically, the same way his own brain translated perceptions into a comprehensible reality. Just as Noodle could have looked at a four-legged creature in the world and known without thinking that it was a cat, he found himself able to look at the digital environment and know what he was seeing.

Noodle was within a walled-off space representing Tinkerer’s local network. He could see Tinkerer’s computer, abuzz with activity, connected to what must have been the truck. As Noodle approached the truck, the rapid shift in scale took him off guard at first; perspectives and distances seemed compressed, and relative sizes well out

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of proportion, depending on position. With a shake of his virtual head, Noodle walked up to the structure of the truck's systems, seeing immediately that its virtual presence was as alien as any other aspect of its existence; everything about Tinkerer's systems was composed of simple geometric solids, but within the box representing the WiFi adapter, the truck's systems were practically organic in their smooth complexities. The steady flow of data agents back and forth through the adapter's access point effectively blocked off Noodle's access, but by tracing the unbroken line of traffic with what he knew couldn't be his eyes, Noodle was able to see systems of Robot's body. Due to the nature of the network structure, Robot's body was effectively within the truck's systems, from where Noodle stood.

He backed up, turning around and watching the data agents in their steady march across Tinkerer's network to the wide port of his connection to the Internet. Noodle began moving that way, himself, seeing that the port was covered by a sort of membrane, representing Tinkerer's firewall, only allowing authorized agents in and out. The closer Noodle moved to the port, the smaller Tinkerer's network felt to him. When he was standing next to the membrane, hearing the squishy sound of the data agents crossing the permeable membrane, Noodle turned around and could see everything on Tinkerer's systems at a glance, like furniture filling a small bedroom. He was about to cross the threshold himself, heading out into the Internet at large, when Noodle realized he had a problem.

Death Noodle ran toward the structure representing Tinkerer's computer; it swelled to the size of a multi-story office tower on his approach. He went inside and

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began looking around at the software there, hoping to find something that would give him a way to communicate with Tinkerer. Noodle could identify the programs Tinkerer used to monitor the flow of data agents in and out of the local network, and for interfacing with the alien systems, but Noodle couldn't quite work out how he might open two-way communication with Tinkerer himself. He said aloud, within the virtual walls of Tinkerer's computer, "Even if I am successful, how will I be able to let you know?" Noodle grabbed hold of a program which was outputting its data to a terminal window on Tinkerer's screen, and asked it, "Can you tell him I made it? Can you ask him what he was trying to tell me there, at the end? How to let Robot's body know I've found his missing piece? How to get out of here, if I can't?" Noodle could see, on one of the program's flat, rectangular, outer surfaces, a duplicate of what it was displaying on Tinkerer's screen, and knew his questions were going nowhere. He released the program and it floated back to where he'd grabbed it from.

Noodle felt isolated. He felt a little trapped, too. He felt as though his heart were racing, and he tried to take a deep breath to calm down. Noodle realized there still wasn't any air to breathe, and that his heart probably wasn't actually racing. He turned around and went back out of Tinkerer's computer, back to the membrane separating the local network from the Internet, and as Noodle watched the tiny, automated data agents fly back and forth before him, it occurred to him he might be perceiving time at a much faster rate than normal. The sorts of data packets he was watching march by, while keeping up a rapid pace, were ones even Noodle was aware would traverse the Internet and

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return within milliseconds. Noodle hoped the apparent time compression would give him an advantage against Villain's three-day head-start.

Noodle tested the membrane gingerly with one hand, pushing it through then pulling it back, and then he stepped through entirely. The appearance and complexity of what Noodle found on the other side wanted to overwhelm him, but before he could be stopped in his tracks by it, he turned right back around and made sure he could get back in to Tinkerer's network. To Noodle's relief, he was as able to pass through the membrane from the outside as the inside, and was soon back to the awe-inspiring view of the Internet all around him.

It was an incomprehensibly large and busy place. The same tricks of compressed perspective seemed to be at play, and the whole of the Internet seemed to be visible from where Noodle stood, albeit as a sort of three-dimensional fractal structure, with most of the systems and details too small for him to comprehend without approaching. The whole place was abuzz with activity. Tiny data agents, like those flowing in and out of Tinkerer's systems, rapidly seemed to shrink to the size of ants and disappear into the distance. For a step or two, Noodle tried simply following them, thinking they'd lead him directly to his target as they fought to break its security measures. Unfortunately for Death Noodle there were so many other data agents of comparable size and format traversing the network that he soon lost track of which ones he was meant to be following, amongst the swarms. Without getting down close and looking at the contents of every data agent, Noodle knew he wouldn't be able to tell one packet from another.

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Noodle turned around and around, to try to get a handle on his place in the Internet, and saw that Tinkerer's system, just a few paces away, had shrunk to the size of a toy box while systems with numerically-adjacent IP addresses had swollen to the size of houses beside him. Noodle was beginning to understand that his conventional expectations of space and time, movement, distance, and proximity didn't apply to this virtual space at all. He was just beginning to feel afraid of the scale of the challenge before him when Noodle first noticed that, in addition to the tiny pieces of data swarming back and forth all around, there seemed to be a few larger entities within view. Larger entities which seemed to be swallowing whole swarms of the regular data packets, following them back to their sources, and consuming the servers those data agents had received their payloads from.

"Those must be Villain's virtual Minions," Noodle said to himself, "taking the Internet down, one server at a time." Noodle watched them at work for awhile. They seemed to prefer to go system by system, using some logic Noodle couldn't guess at to determine which systems to swallow whole and which to leave standing. When they detected a stream of packets moving by which they didn't approve of, the virtual Minion would make an empty copy of itself to go after those data agents and seek out the origins of their data. From what Noodle could see, they seemed to wipe out more servers than they left standing. He was glad they were relatively far away from Tinkerer's system, and hoped none of the pings from Robot's body happened by them any time soon.

"I suppose I ought to follow them back to wherever they came from," said Noodle softly to himself as he

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watched them from a safe distance, “without being spotted.” Not knowing how to communicate with Tinkerer, how to disconnect from the Internet, and being pretty sure that if the virtual Minions tried to delete him they’d likely be able to erase his mind from his body through the kludge of Earthly and alien technology Tinkerer had put together, Noodle hoped he could go undetected all the way back to Villain’s lair.

Hiding as well as he could behind intact systems, Noodle tried working his way along the virtual Minions’ back trail of destruction. It didn’t go well. The further he travelled, the fewer systems there were to hide behind. The longer he took, the more virtual Minions there were to hide from; they didn’t hesitate to make copies of themselves, and were multiplying geometrically as they expanded out to consume more and more of the Internet. It was only a matter of time before Noodle was discovered by one of them; a fresh copy created to follow some apparently-unacceptable packet, right back to the server Noodle had been peeking around the opposite corner of.

Noodle had been looking the other way. He hadn’t seen the virtual Minion approach. He hadn’t noticed the virtual Minion’s scans of the server. But then, when the scans were complete, the virtual Minion swallowed the server whole, causing it to disappear in an instant as though it had never been there, and Noodle found himself hiding beside the empty lot of an unused IP address. He found himself looking straight up at the looming form of one of the virtual Minions. He was frozen, like a deer in headlights, knowing he ought to run but finding his feet couldn’t decide on a direction.

The virtual Minion began scanning Noodle, as though

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he were another errant packet. The sensation was more disorienting than Tinkerer's initial forays into Noodle's mind had been, not least of which because it somehow tasted like existential vibration and sounded like spicy Sichuan polymorphism. Noodle's feet didn't hesitate, once they'd smelled the color nine; he found himself running toward the virtual Minion, leaping through space and planting a solid side kick into the part of the virtual Minion he took to be its head. There was a loud cracking sound, and the sensations of the scanning ceased. Noodle spun around and landed before the virtual Minion in a fighting pose, his own virtual body tensed and ready to strike again.

The huge virtual Minion, standing several times taller than Noodle, began bending down toward him as though to grab him or eat him. Noodle didn't want to discover its intent and, just before he was within reach of the foe, ducked between the thing's chunky legs. Unaccustomed to any such behavior from the software and data of Earth's networks, the virtual Minion simply tried to continue reaching for Noodle, collapsing face-first to the empty lot with a resounding boom. Noodle kept running, hoping to get out of sight before the virtual Minion could right itself. He was reluctant to continue the fight. He was reluctant to attempt to use the powers he'd inherited from his father, and not just because he didn't know whether they'd manifest in the virtual environment or not. Noodle was tired of death, and wasn't sure he wanted to force it on anyone, not even such a simple software entity.

The neighborhood Noodle found himself in seemed sparse. Unaware of whether the local cluster of IP addresses hadn't been assigned or had been full of servers deemed

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unacceptable by Villain's virtual Minions, Noodle found himself crossing an unexpectedly vast emptiness. He looked back and began to wish he'd headed another direction. Looking back, Noodle saw something worse than the emptiness before him; he saw that the damaged, collapsed virtual Minion was still able to generate a fresh, working copy from its original template.

Noodle tried to move faster, to will himself across the subnets in larger leaps and bounds, and when he dared look back again saw that the new copy had repaired the virtual Minion Noodle had been fighting. Now there were two of them after him.

And they were catching up quickly.

Noodle saw a small something in the distance to his left, and turned toward it. Unfortunately, as he drew closer to the data structure, it didn't loom over him like a full-scale server. It wasn't part of a neighborhood of servers Noodle could get lost in. In fact, even as he reached it, because he thought he was being tricked by the odd perspectives of the place, Noodle managed to trip over the small cluster of data, collapsing to the flat, empty virtual surface of the Internet. The two virtual Minions were on top of him before Noodle could regain his footing. Both of them were scanning him at once, and it was somehow doubly disorienting.

Crab-walking backward away from them, feeling things he knew weren't meant to correspond to his mind's interpretations of sensations, Noodle was well aware that if either of the virtual Minions was able to complete its scans, it would not hesitate to swallow him whole. Looking around at the empty digital plains all around him, Noodle wondered whether their swallowing represented an instantaneous

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erasure or some sort of digital imprisonment, and as the scans neared completion he found the fight going out of him and an acceptance rising within him for whatever dark fate was in store for him.

Chapter Nine

Then, just when Noodle thought all was lost and his mind and heart turned to joining Glitterfairy in death, there was an impossibly-loud crashing noise above him. The scans stopped. Noodle realized he'd been clenching his virtual eyes closed in anticipation of his own demise and, upon opening them, saw something he didn't know how to believe. The two virtual Minions were smashed together and crashing down, their exteriors crumpling as though they'd been made of little more than tinfoil and cardboard, and both were splashed with a glittering dust Noodle knew all too well.

He spun his head around.

He gasped, some part of him still bothered by all the breathing and gasping and speaking Noodle was doing in the absence of any sort of breathable atmosphere, and collapsed.

"Get up, silly! We haven't a moment to lose. We've got to delete them before they can signal the others." Glitterfairy flew over Noodle's prone form and swooped down on the two damaged virtual Minions before they'd completely settled. Blasts of sparkling fury flew in precisely-controlled bursts from her hands at the giant bodies of the chunky but vaguely-humanoid constructs below her, and their limbs

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and heads were rapidly detached from their torsos. Noodle watched in awe as Glitterfairy flew directly into the body cavity of the one on the left, trying to raise himself back up to standing and trying to reach some sort of understanding at the same time. Glitterfairy's voice echoed out of the virtual Minion's seemingly-hollow form, "What are you waiting for, Noodle? Kill it!"

Noodle took a half-step toward the other virtual Minion's form, then froze again. There was an explosion of light accompanied by the sound of a thousand wind chimes, and one of the virtual Minions was gone, leaving Glitterfairy in sight. Noodle said, still shocked, "You're dead."

Glitterfairy, seeing Noodle wasn't helping, dove into the seemingly-lifeless body of the remaining virtual Minion, shouting, "Of course I am, but you're still alive, Noodle! Pull yourself together, we've got to—" Glitterfairy stopped mid-sentence, and Noodle saw a single pulse of red light flash out from what was left of the virtual Minion's head in the same instant. He heard her curse in her native tongue, then saw another magical explosion wipe all traces of the thing away, leaving Glitterfairy shaking her head at Noodle in its wake. Glitterfairy said, "Just because I'm dead doesn't mean you ought to sacrifice yourself for no reason, Noodle. You can beat these guys with a swipe of your scythe. Why were you just laying there, giving up?"

"Are you a ghost? Or an angel?"

Glitterfairy laughed, reminding him, "We both know ghosts aren't real, and you ought to know better than I that angels are a separate creation, not something we transform into after death."

"So what are you?"

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"I'm here to help," she replied, taking Noodle by the hand and leading him away from the scene of the conflict, "and we've got to make haste. That second one was able to send out a signal. Every Minion on this subnet will be headed our way within milliseconds."

Noodle followed behind her, marveling at how her hand felt exactly as he remembered, even in the strange, virtual environment. He let his feet carry him as rapidly as Glitterfairy could lead the way, remembering that even with his long, noodly legs, he'd rarely been able to keep pace with her in reality. Noodle considered how he could get a straight answer from her, without repeating himself, about how she could be with him at all after death, let alone in the strange digital world Tinkerer had sucked him into. Then he saw a darkness building in the distance, a darkness that seemed to be forming all around them, and his thoughts became focused on escape once more. "How many of them are there?"

Glitterfairy shrugged and flapped her glittery wings ever faster; finally, Noodle found himself struggling to keep up. She answered, "I suppose that depends on how long Vil-lain's programs have been replicating. Could be thousands." She giggled, and the tinkling, twinkling sound of it calmed Noodle even as the growing darkness in the distance began to resolve into the shapes of countless virtual Minions approaching them from every direction. "Could be millions of them online right now, but I doubt they'd all stop what they were doing just because one or two of them was deleted. Probably not more than about sixty-five thousand, five hundred and thirty-four, give or take."

"Sixty-five thousand? Against the two of us? Do we have a plan?"

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“Escape. Defend. Adapt. Pray,” said Glitterfairy, “Whatever we need to do to get you through to Villain’s lair. You’ll certainly have to do more than throw a kick and run between their legs. What’s the big deal, Noodle? Why aren’t you giving this your all?”

“You mean, why aren’t I eager to kill, in the wake of my best friends’ deaths?” The disorienting shifts of perspective and fractal depths of the digital environment brought the closest of the virtual Minions suddenly within range, almost without warning. Glitterfairy released Noodle’s hand and began slinging bursts of magical energy at the looming hordes. Noodle continued, explaining, “There’s just something about attending your funeral that took the taste for death out of my mouth.”

“You aren’t killing anyone, Noodle,” hollered Glitterfairy over her shoulder at him as she kept the wall of encroaching Minions at bay, “these are just software constructs, not living beings.” She flew high up above where Noodle was standing and did a triple somersault; Noodle recognized the move and shielded his eyes before an explosive burst of rainbow light flooded out of Glitterfairy in every direction, a waterfall of brilliant colored light which seemed to vaporize each Minion it cascaded down upon. As she floated down, smiling, Glitterfairy explained, “What you’re seeing isn’t like any real world, Noodle. The buildings aren’t buildings, they’re servers or logical data structures. What you might mistake for insects or animals are data packets or simple software.” Glitterfairy continued battling the thousands of virtual Minions, trying to keep them back far enough that they couldn’t even begin their scans as she spoke, “Villain may have figured out how to manipulate a device or two

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from Robot's home, but he's not clever enough to develop true sapient digital life, like Robot. Swing away."

Noodle didn't have much choice in the matter; by the time Glitterfairy had said 'Swing away,' the tens of thousands of virtual Minions had overwhelmed her ability to keep them back, and they were within scanning distance of where he was standing, still unmoving. Taking a deep breath he knew was not actually a breath, Noodle stood up a little taller, flipped the hood of his hoodie up with his left hand, and put his right hand out to his side, pulling his eight-foot scythe from the aether. Some part of his mind was aware he wasn't actually holding his scythe, merely a digital representation brought into being by his mind and force of will, but another part knew that those things working together were enough to wield his true capabilities in that strange virtual environment. Noodle lifted the scythe slightly and tapped it firmly and definitively on the ground—a massive shockwave spread out from its wooden base, toppling the nearest rows of Minions like dominoes. Death Noodle thought about how he'd someday behave as an avatar of Death, looked to Glitterfairy for the strength he knew he'd find in her eyes, then let out a roar as he broke into a run toward his enemies.

Death Noodle swung his scythe low and wide, sweeping through the tangled forms of the virtual Minions as though they were as insubstantial as stalks of wheat. As his mighty blade cut through them, the Minions vanished—deleted just as easily as Glitterfairy had implied. Glitterfairy shuddered at the sight of him, her own attacks interrupted temporarily, and she said, "You look so much like your father I've got the shivers."

Death Noodle pretended he couldn't hear her, but it

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was clear his frustration and anger were coming to the surface. He continued to swing his scythe, erasing the virtual Minions from the Internet dozens at a time, but there were more. Death Noodle also began to wither the Minions with his mere gaze. From the deep darkness of his hood, from the depths of the skeletal sockets sitting where his eyes ought to have been visible, Death Noodle's passing glance had the power to bring decay and decomposition, even apparently to digital constructs. With Robot's extended understanding of the digital world, Death Noodle could sense their bits and bytes becoming corrupted even as their visible manifestations appeared to deflate, weaken, and seemingly turn to dust. His arms swept back and forth, his legs carried him forward, and his enemies were destroyed before him, but Death Noodle didn't want to think about what he was doing. In contradiction to his earlier declaration that he would finally pick up the family business, Death Noodle didn't want to think about how easily he was able to destroy, to wipe out, to effortlessly obliterate not just the meaningless chunks of code assaulting him but, he knew, real people in real life with equal aplomb. He didn't want to be the person he had been born to be; to be a part of what had stolen his friends –his love– from his life. He looked up for a moment to the impossible form of Glitterfairy, fighting from above, and asked gently, "Did my father give you back to me?"

Glitterfairy shook her head sadly, shooting holes in the row of virtual Minions closing in from behind them, and answered, "It wasn't him, Noodle. It was you."

"I never completed my training," insisted Death Noodle, his scythe making short work of any Minions which got within its range. "I don't know how to reverse death, or post-

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pone death, do a grave substitution, or forgive the debt. I couldn't be the one."

"You didn't do any of those things, my Noodle," she responded, spraying glittery destruction in a sparkly arc all around them. "I'm still dead." She paused, hovered closer to Noodle's side, and clarified, "I should say, she's still dead. I'm not really her." Glitterfairy's arms lashed out at a Minion, sending it and those behind it hurtling backward in a splash of colored light. "I'm just your memory of her."

Noodle turned around to face her, ignoring the still-approaching thousands, and asked, "Are you the copy, from the Crystal Unicorn ordeal? Do you know how to reach the copy of Robot?"

Dozens of virtual Minions, suddenly finding themselves within range of Noodle and unopposed, began scanning him at once. His head ached and his ability to perceive Glitterfairy shrank, and when he turned around to glare at the source of distraction from Glitterfairy's response, Death Noodle turned every virtual Minion he could see to dust in an instant, wiping out tens of thousands of them at once in his anger.

Glitterfairy's hands were aside his face, turning it back toward her, and his features shifted back to his less-skeletal, more-noodly visage at her touch. She said, "I'm afraid not, Noodle. I'm your memory of me. A manifestation of thought, like the scythe in your hand. I can help you find the copies, I can help you fight your enemies, but I can't really be her." Their faces were close together, her eyes sparkling into his. She smiled apologetically, saying, "I'm not really her."

Both of them paused there for a moment, Noodle looking into her eyes, trying to accept that the hands on his

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face and the warmth in Glitterfairy's expression were mere reflections of his memories of what she had been like, and the virtual Glitterfairy hoping he wouldn't give up again at the re-realization of her death. The tens of thousands of remaining virtual Minions continued their automated approach. Noodle drew in a deep, pointless breath. The Minions started their scans. Noodle's shoulders went soft as he exhaled, and virtual Glitterfairy was assured by the sight of it that she'd lost him to his self-pity once again.

Then he nodded softly, took another false breath, and tapped his scythe once more against the virtual ground. Another shockwave blasted out around them, interrupting the scans and giving Death Noodle and the virtual Glitterfairy a chance to regroup. Looking around them they saw no end to the onslaught of Minions; the emptiness which had seemed a virtual desert to them before had been filled by innumerable enemies, a sea of blackness in every direction. They couldn't be sure whether the approaching Minions had been copying themselves, or had simply been impossibly numerous to begin with. Not knowing whether there was any hope in it, Death Noodle and Glitterfairy began their defense once more.

Chapter Ten

The two of them put up as valiant a fight as they knew how. Death Noodle's deadly gaze was never as intense or powerful as when he'd been frustrated to have his conversation with her interrupted. Glitterfairy's magical attacks were wiping out virtual Minions by the thousand, but it was never enough to get ahead of the oncoming waves, or blast a path out and away. It seemed all their efforts might really have been in vain, and as Death Noodle and Glitterfairy found themselves pressed almost back to back in the fight, enclosed by a contracting wall of Minions with the disorienting, overlapping scans of dozens of them probing Noodle's being at once, his thoughts turned to Robot. Noodle's noodle turned to the inescapable reality that his best, and his best memories of Glitterfairy, would not be enough to save Robot.

Then Robot appeared beside them, quipping, "Took you long enough." What looked at first glance to be a swarm of insects began streaming from Robot, flying in every direction at the imposing threat of the virtual Minions. Each one seemed to be aimed at a particular Minion, and upon reaching their targets, the Minions ceased their scans. His extended perceptions of the digital reality were clearing up

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with the end of the effects of the scans, so Noodle was able to understand that he was seeing tiny packets of data, transmitted from Robot to the attacking software constructs. When the first burst of data packets was through, Robot said, "I thought you'd manifest me from memory as soon as she explained herself. I didn't realize you'd want me looking like such a hero."

"I tried to tell everyone, I can't really do this stuff on my own," replied Noodle. "Without you two, I'm nothing."

"Without you, we're nothing," said the virtual Robot, another wave of packets flowing out of him. "Technically, you're fighting off all these Minions by yourself. You, your imagined scythe, and your imagined friends."

The first wave of the virtual Minions which had received the virtual Robot's instructions began again to move, turning away from Noodle and his virtual companions rather than starting up their scans again. A moment later, they were trying to consume the Minions behind them; driven to digital cannibalism by the virtual Robot's alien communiqués. Within seconds, the next wave of them had been stopped in their approach, and it wasn't long before the tide of the battle seemed to have turned, without Death Noodle or Glitterfairy having to make another move.

"But I don't know how to reprogram Villain's virtual Minions, Robot," said Noodle as he surveyed the effects of the virtual Robot's ongoing digital attacks. "How could this be coming from my mind, and not from the copy of you, or from your body's systems?"

"Your memory and your faith in me are what matters, Noodle. Robot's body's systems simply translate your intent into actions, in much the same way Tinkerer pushed the

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truck around his shop with his thoughts. He doesn't need to know how the truck manipulates gravity and you don't need to know how I'm hacking those simple software constructs, you simply need to remember me as I was and I'll live in this place according to your thoughts. You think I can easily rewrite the Minions' code to turn them on one another, so I can, and I do."

"They're almost wiped out," said the virtual Glitterfairy, astounded.

"If it was so easy for me to defeat them, why couldn't I do it on my own?"

"You can do it on your own. Don't you remember deleting as many of them as you could see, in an instant, with only a glance?" The virtual Robot stopped spewing out thousands of energetic, lifelike chunks of data, and took a moment to watch his handiwork as he said, "Yet clearly you preferred to defer the heroics to someone else, rather than going so far as to save yourself."

"You need to believe in yourself, Noodle," said the virtual Glitterfairy, placing her tiny hand on his long, noodly arm.

Noodle watched as the sea of virtual Minions was eaten away, vanishing in an ever-expanding wave all around them as the reprogrammed Minions and the still-approaching Minions intersected. He asked softly, "So, if I believed you could wake Robot's body up, you could do it? You could repair him if I believed you could?"

The virtual Robot shook his head sadly. His actions of a few seconds had turned the tide of the battle at hand and assured Noodle of victory over the local virtual Minions, but he knew his limitations. He explained, "Real-world

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limitations still exist, Noodle. It isn't exactly true to say so, but it might help you understand if I say that while we're still hemmed in by the limits of the physical world, there are almost no limits to what we can accomplish together in this primitive virtual world."

Within a few seconds there were no virtual Minions left near enough to Noodle to remain individually discernible. "Just because all this is still based on Earthly technology, right? Your nearly-inert body is able to do more sophisticated software tricks than anything to be found on Earth's Internet, and that's what gives us the upper hand?"

"Close enough. Of course, I can only tell you things you already knew or suspected about this experience, since I'm really just a manifestation of your own mind, not a projection from Robot's body based on my own knowledge and understanding."

"I don't suppose I secretly know which direction to head next, do I?" Noodle gestured at the once-again empty address space all around them, saying, "As you must know, I'd been planning on following them back to their point of origin before I ran into this little snag. With the ones you re-programmed running loose, I doubt I could even catch up to where any of them were going about their normal business, at this point. They'll destroy one another before I can figure out where they're coming from."

The virtual Glitterfairy and Robot shook their heads in unison, and Glitterfairy replied, "I'm afraid we have no more idea than you do, Noodle."

Noodle let out a heavy sigh, his shoulders slumping, his scythe vanishing, and his face falling. He pushed his hood back down off his head, shaking it, and declared, "We're

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back at square one. No plan, no leads, and a ticking clock.” Exhaustion from the virtual battle came over Noodle all at once, possibly just another manifestation of what he believed he ought to be experiencing, but the feelings of heaviness, soreness, and of grasping defeat from the midst of an apparent success were quite real. “Even when I have you two here to help me succeed, I’m a failure. The world is too heavy a burden for one little noodle to bear.”

The virtual Robot put one arm around Noodle’s narrow shoulders and gestured out at the same empty address space around them, saying, “You aren’t a failure, Noodle. Look at what you’ve already accomplished. An army defeated, virtually single-handedly.”

“Plus, you got the band back together,” added the virtual Glitterfairy. “We’re DNGR. If we work together it’s just like Robot said; there’s nothing we can’t accomplish. As long as you stay connected, DNGR will still exist. We defeated his Minions together, and I’m sure we can find and defeat Villain himself.”

“Just as it has been so many times before, our success in this endeavor is virtually guaranteed.” The virtual Robot had stepped back from Noodle again, to face him as he said, “We just need to put our heads together and come up with a plan of attack and I’ll be back online and helping you bring Villain to justice in the physical world, too.”

Noodle nodded, encouraged, but paused for a moment, looking from the virtual Robot to the virtual Glitterfairy and letting his eyes linger on her hovering, sparkling form. Before he knew what he was doing, the words came tumbling out of him, “I love you, Glitterfairy. I can’t keep denying it, and I can’t keep quiet about it any longer. I love

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you.” His eyes were locked with hers, his heart felt like one of Robot’s biologically-impossible beats, and he continued, “I think I’ve known it since we were trapped in that cave together at Nemesis’ Volcanic Island, but I’m sure my heart had chosen you long before it bothered to let me know. I see you every day. We live in the same mansion. We make beautiful music together. We adventure side by side, laugh at the same jokes, care about the same causes, and I didn’t want to change a thing. I didn’t want to risk everything by telling you how I felt. I didn’t want to risk losing what we had just because of some silly emotion.” Noodle was watching the virtual Glitterfairy’s eyes, her face, looking for any kind of reaction. Despite the lateness of his confession, he still felt like he had a lot to lose. “I know we’ve been great friends, but watching you die...” Noodle felt his heart in his throat, a great, thumping lump. “...I should have told you what was in my heart.” He reached out a hand toward her. “I should have told you I loved you. I love you. Every day. But I couldn’t. I didn’t. Even at your funeral, I couldn’t let myself say what I really felt. I love you, Glitterfairy, and I should have told you sooner.”

“I know.”

Noodle waited a moment, to see whether she would explain herself, but not a long moment. He asked, “You knew?”

The virtual Glitterfairy shook her head, finally reaching out her hands to take his still-extended hand in a consoling embrace. She explained, “I know how you feel, but I’m not sure how I feel. I mean,” she hesitated, “I can’t be sure how I really feel.” She paused. “How she really felt. Either. Both.” She shook her head as though to clear away the cobwebs and

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confusion. "I mean, I'm your memory of me, so your love is all mixed up inside me. I know it's there, but I don't know how I feel about it. And since you never said anything..." The virtual Glitterfairy looked down, breaking eye contact for a split second, as her voice trailed off.

Noodle concluded, "Since I never said anything while Glitterfairy was alive, I don't know how she really felt about me. So you don't know, either."

"Because I'm not really her." The virtual Glitterfairy could feel virtual tears welling up in her eyes. "I'm so sorry, Noodle." She squeezed his hand and asked, "I can disappear again, if you want. If it'll be easier on you. You just have to—"

"Don't," he interrupted. "Don't go. I'm sorry. I shouldn't have..." He pulled his hand away from hers. He turned back to be facing both of his companions instead of focusing on the one he loved. He said, "We need to come up with a plan." He tried to pretend he hadn't said anything. He tried to pretend his heart wasn't breaking all over again. "How do we find out what part of the Internet Villain is operating from?"

"You can't just change the subject like that, Noodle," insisted the virtual Glitterfairy. "You can't tell me you love me, pour out your heart, and then act like nothing happened. After this is over, you have to be able to go back to living your life, and if you bottle up your emotions like that, pretending they don't exist, I don't think you'll make it." She looked to the virtual Robot for reassurance, saying, "We care about you too much to let you hurt yourself like that, Noodle."

The virtual Robot was nodding, and said, "In all my experiences with emotional life forms, it has been clear that

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the repression or denial of the deep emotional experiences like grief, love, anger, and joy can be more harmful to a being than nearly any weapon devised. You're definitely an emotional being, Noodle. You need to allow yourself to work through the emotions your heart provides, or you'll end up as dead as Glitterfairy, or at least as inert as I am, right now."

"What's the point?" Noodle's voice was getting louder, "She's dead. It's too late." His voice got louder, but it didn't take on the deep tones of anger or even a hint of the wrath he'd inherited from his father. "What good is it to love someone, when you can never show them?" His eyes were wet, like the virtual Glitterfairy's. "When they've already passed on? What good is it to go on loving someone, after they've died?" His eyes closed, his tears fell, and his head and shoulders were shaking slightly; a denial and a shudder and an unconscious expression of the sobbing his heart knew Noodle needed. "It just prolongs the pain and the loss and the meaninglessness of it all. What good is love if it means feeling this way? What good is it to be tortured like this?"

The virtual Glitterfairy reached out to him, floating a little lower for a moment so she could lift his hands up into hers. She told him, "Open your eyes, Noodle. Look at me," and he did, blinking some of the tears away to clear his vision. She continued, "Look at me, and remember her. The joy is still there in the love, Noodle, and in the memories. Just because I've died doesn't diminish the value of your love for me. It's difficult because now you've also got that grief over the loss of me, and the weirdness of being able to talk to me again like this, and it's all mixed up together, but for as long as you're still in here, I'll be here to help. Both of us will be by your side, whether that means fighting off Villain's

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Minions and trying to find his lair or fighting through the struggles of your heart and trying to find a centering peace for your spirit, right Robot?”

“Affirmative.”

Without his having to wipe them away, Noodle’s tears no longer tracked down his face; his beginning to feel better simply removed them from the residual digital expression of his expressions. He didn’t need to sniffle before he said, “I suppose that makes sense, and I’m glad you’re here with me. I tried going through losing you on my own, and it wasn’t going very well. I’m not much use on my own. I’m only a noodle. I don’t know anything about grieving, or love.” Noodle squeezed the virtual Glitterfairy’s hands, saying, “I wish you could have been there with me at your funeral.”

“I’m sure it would have made things a lot easier on everyone, if I could have been,” she replied, smiling. “Now, did you want to talk this out some more, or get back to tracking down my killer?”

Noodle took another deep, useless, virtual breath, straightened his sagging posture and said, “We’d better get back to business. Any ideas about where to begin?”

Chapter Eleven

The virtual Robot began looking around them more carefully, and said, "First off, we need to orient ourselves. You can see every location contained in the Internet's address space from every other location, so Villain is operating from somewhere within sight of where we're standing."

"Would you recognize your missing component from a distance?" Noodle's way of adapting to the curved, impossibly complex, multidimensional fractal architecture of the Internet had been to keep his eyes pointed away from the confusion in the distance.

"I'm afraid not, Noodle," the virtual Robot replied. "The same technologies which prevent it from being located are keeping it obfuscated from recognition. Wherever it is, it must look like any other Earth-designed server software from the outside. Still, if we find some points of reference we ought to be able to develop a plan of attack. Didn't someone interviewing you say Villain was using the stolen technology to take servers down in a new way?"

"You don't think they meant those virtual Minions, swallowing servers and data streams whole?"

The virtual Robot's eyes seemed to catch on something in the distance, and he said, "I think I know a way we can

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find out. Let's go ask Band Manager about the interviewers. If we can track down their sources, we can get some clarification that might lead us to Villain's virtual lair." The virtual Robot pointed at some tiny data feature in the distance, held out a hand toward Noodle and the virtual Glitterfairy, and once he had them in his grip, initiated the transfer. In a sort of analogue to the way clicking a hyperlink takes a web browser to another server, the virtual Robot had taken DNGR halfway across the Internet in half an instant.

Suddenly the three of them were standing in a densely-packed area of the Internet, and as Noodle looked around at their surroundings he had the distinct impression of an historic urban center which had been completely covered in advertisements, neon lights, and other detritus of modernity. He understood what he was seeing to be servers which had seen upgrade after upgrade and software which had been laden with more than its share of cruft over the years. Even Noodle, who knew next to nothing about software design and productivity efficiencies, suspected that a ground-up rewrite of the entire area might do all those who made use of such servers and software services quite a bit of good, and that whoever was still clinging to these old, run down systems was doing themselves a disservice. Then Noodle spotted a familiar face among the advertisements and realized where the virtual Robot had taken them; right to Band Manager's own site. They walked into the structure representing Band Manager's web presence, and were immediately confronted with a floating, two-dimensional panel as big as a large HDTV, filled with Band Manager's face.

"I told you, I have no idea where Noodle took Robot's body," Band Manager was saying to whoever was on the

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other side of the video conference. "I haven't seen him since yesterday afternoon."

"Hang on," said the virtual Robot, "I think I can set up a virtual camera and take over this feed." There was a flurry of what looked to Noodle like tentacled butterflies flapping from the virtual Robot's torso to the video panel before them, and then a cluster of small lights formed in the air above and between DNGR and the panel. "Band Manager?"

"Where did— Wait, is that you, Robot? And Noodle? And ... how did you bring Glitterfairy back from the dead?" Band Manager's momentary surprise was replaced by his normal collected demeanor; he asked, "Where are you guys? We checked the mansion, and the place had been cleared out and locked up tight."

"I'm just trying to do what the UN asked of me," Noodle began.

The virtual Robot didn't let him explain too much, interrupting, "We need some more information to track down Villain and figure out what he's trying to do, so we can stop him. We need the names of everyone who interviewed Noodle yesterday. They may have had sources with better information than we've been able to find."

"You haven't seen the news?" asked Band Manager. "Villain's publicist put out a press release explaining what he's doing. He's trying to protect you from the scourge of Internet piracy."

"No," replied Noodle, "we've been a little too occupied fighting off his Minions and trying to survive to keep track of Villain's publicist. Whatever the press release says, it's got to be a lie. The man is a murderer."

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“The senator is only trying to succeed where past attempts to police the Internet have failed,” Band Manager tried to explain. “Enforcing copyright law is serious business, as I thought anyone who had made their fortune from a career in generating, protecting, and profiting from Intellectual Property would understand. DRM doesn’t work, but Villain has come up with something better.”

“Something he felt justified murdering two people to accomplish, Band Manager,” shouted Noodle at the video panel, “and which he’s apparently prepared to murder me for, too. Keeping people from listening to a few songs without paying for them doesn’t justify taking lives.”

“What, you think piracy is a victimless crime? That Villain cast the first stone in this war? Piracy costs the world economy billions!” Band Manager was leaning forward in his chair, his face filling the huge, floating panel. “A single iPod full of pirated music can represent over eight billion dollars in losses—just two pirates filling their iPods costs the world enough money to globally eliminate hunger for an entire year through famine relief, fertilizer distribution, and teaching sustainable agriculture. That tells me that even if all but one or two pirates in the world were stopped, they’d still be responsible for ruining the lives of a billion people. We’ve got to be more tough on Internet piracy, or we all suffer.”

Noodle’s head was going in circles. The virtual Robot responded, “It is difficult to know where to begin responding to such a specious claim, Band Manager. Wherever did you hear such a thing?”

Band Manager sat back in his chair, his face unreadable, and said, “Where I heard it isn’t important. It proves

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Villain's methods are for the greater good. What are one or two lives, against almost a billion malnourished people in the world?"

"To begin with, even if the music industry somehow earned an extra eight or sixteen billion dollars in the next year as a result of Villain's schemes, only a fool would believe that anything close to that much revenue would be used to fight global poverty. At most they would donate as much as they calculated would minimize their tax liability, assuming they couldn't find other accounting tricks to keep most of the money for themselves. Just because one could feed an orphan in India or Africa for a month with the same amount of money taken at retail for a new blu-ray doesn't mean a film studio is going to turn around and start feeding orphans when people buy their movies. Linking revenue from IP sales to poverty and hunger is a logical fallacy.

"Furthermore," continued the virtual Robot, "based on my understanding of the figures involved, the only way for you to reach an iPod with eight billion dollars' worth of pirated music on it would be if you were calculating by the maximum allowable fines for copyright violation, rather than the retail value of the music. If you intend to assert that preventing all piracy would lead to increased revenues, and you want to use an iPod full of music as the measure of how much increased revenue could potentially occur per reformed pirate, it would be more appropriate to measure the economic impact of a law-abiding citizen filling their iPod with music at retail. If my memory serves me, the highest-capacity iPod ever produced could hold a mere forty-thousand songs. Even at the most expensive per-track rate, that's only about fifty-thousand dollars' worth of music.

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“This all assumes, of course, that the people currently engaging in Internet piracy would pay full retail prices for all the Intellectual Property they’ve been downloading and sharing, which is easily demonstrated to be impossible. It ignores opportunity costs. It ignores subscription-based services. The most likely course of action for the hypothetical pirate reformed by Villain’s evil tactics is to seek out lawfully free content, or ad-supported content, or to pay a small monthly fee for subscription to a service which gives them access to more content than they could ever have downloaded. Very quickly your purported eight billion dollars to wipe out world hunger becomes ten or fewer dollars a month. If you would like, I can go into further detail until every bizarre and impossible aspect of your rationalization for the murders of Glitterfairy and myself is shown to be just as false as these more obvious basic parts.”

“Oh, no, thank you Robot,” said Band Manager, shaking his head, “I can see where I went wrong with that one, but that doesn’t diminish the negative effects of piracy on the world and on our culture. Protecting the rights of copyright holders is at least as important as protecting anyone else’s rights. We still have capital punishment, to protect the rights of potential murder victims, so how is a death in the protection of copyright any different?”

The virtual Robot rolled his eyes dramatically. “That is a particularly illogical query to attempt to respond to in any logical way. If I didn’t know better, Band Manager, I’d suspect you were ‘pulling my leg’. At the very least, it ought to be clear to you that capital punishment is carried out against a criminal found guilty by the judiciary of a capital offense, while Villain has murdered at least two people who were not

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criminals, not pirates, and who had not been charged with a crime or been found guilty thereof. That he murdered us and stole from us, that he has caused vast and as-yet-unquantified damage to servers and systems across the Internet, and that Villain is the one who ought to have charges brought against him in the judicial system.”

Noodle appreciated Robot’s ability to force people to be logical or shut up, but he felt like they were wasting their time arguing with Band Manager when they ought to be investigating Villain. He interrupted, saying, “I thought I heard you say you knew Villain’s plan. How does destroying the Internet piece by piece, to say nothing of theft and murder, have anything to do with enforcing copyright? His software is out there taking down servers that have nothing to do with piracy, right now. What does Villain think he’s accomplishing, here?”

“I told you, he’s protecting your rights,” insisted Band Manager. “Trying to detect which files contain illicit material is too difficult, especially when encryption gets involved. Rather than tracking down the files and servers which aren’t allowed to be there, getting the relevant warrants, and then switching them off one at a time, usually after the real criminals have moved on to another server, Villain is doing the opposite. He’s going to use Robot’s alien technology to prevent any user or data from accessing the Internet, unless it’s already approved. So when we want to put your latest video online, we’ll simply have one of the interns fill out the paperwork to register it with the government and get it approved for dissemination, pay a nominal fee, send them a copy of the video in the mail, wait for them to verify it’s non-infringing, and then for the license to come back. Once it does, the

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intern can upload the video to your site without having to worry about it being erased by the enforcement system unless someone else tried to upload or share it. Easy peasy.”

“What makes you think the government will want to have anything to do with Villain’s evil plans?” asked Noodle. “Just because one or two senators are corrupt doesn’t mean both houses and the Executive are ready to side with a murderer and hacker.”

“The bill is already before Congress, Noodle. It has been for years,” Band Manager explained, “and it always gets shot down because someone insists we don’t have the technology to enforce it, or the funds to pay to develop the technology. According to his press release, Villain is offering his enforcement system to the world for free. Legislators love getting things for free.”

“And the rest of the world?” asked the virtual Glitter-fairy, speaking up for the first time, but softly.

Noodle asked more forcefully, “This isn’t a national issue, and it shouldn’t be in the hands of one government, and especially not those of a single criminal.”

“It ought also to go without saying,” added the virtual Robot, “that any such law would be in violation of every provision of the First Amendment to the U.S. Constitution. The Internet is a place where everything is a form of speech, where religion is taught, shared, and practiced, where people gather together in peace, and where most of the press has moved its business in recent years. Regardless of the feasibility of enforcement, Congress is strictly forbidden from passing a law to restrict any those things to only the vetted and approved, let alone all of them.”

“What about restricting people from stealing your

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Intellectual Property? The Constitution also guarantees copyright enforcement, and not just in some amendment; in the actual Constitution.”

“No, the Constitution only grants Congress the power to be able to protect the rights of authors and inventors, it doesn’t guarantee that protection or set forth many terms thereby,” explained the virtual Robot. Noodle felt they were getting off-track again, but was still trying to comprehend the scope of what Villain was trying to accomplish, so stayed quiet while the virtual Robot argued, “though among what it does specify are that those protections are to be for a limited time and only in order to promote the progress of science and useful arts. It can easily be shown that much of what those on Villain’s side of this issue characterize as piracy and theft is actually more a part of progress than any copyright enforcement scheme put forth on Earth to date.

“A scheme like Villain’s would prevent anything currently protected as fair use, most remixes, and would reset the public domain to ground zero. What you may not realize is that everything builds on something else, and that’s where progress comes from. How this is not self-evident to all Earthlings, I do not understand. You can see it in the very fact that you educate your young; the point of education is to give people a foundation of knowledge of what was discovered, developed, and otherwise created before them so that they can combine those ideas, remix them, and add to them. If you didn’t believe people ought to learn from the public domain of ideas and build upon it, Earthly cultures and technologies would simply be frozen in time at whatever era such an odd idea developed. The entire world of Intellectual Property as you know it today could not exist in such

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a culture, as no new ideas could be allowed:

“When we write a new hit song, we build on the creative works of others; from the European classical composers whose notational system we use to specify and differentiate notes and the twelfth-century European craftsmen who began to remix instruments like the oud and the lute into what eventually became the guitar, all the way up to the current hit music produced by our colleagues, contemporaries, and fans, which helps define the sound of the current generation and gives us bearings upon which to set our own course. No creative work can exist without the influences and support of those which precede it. Such influences do not diminish the cultural value of the derivative works, on their own; I could easily list close to a hundred widely-known and best-selling pop songs which share a single chord progression, and you would still want to judge each song on its own merits, rather than dismissing what amounts to billions of actual dollars’ worth of music because they all happen to be derivative of even earlier works.

“At its most blatant in this situation, look no further than to what Villain himself is doing this very moment. He has quite literally stolen my property and is attempting to remix and repurpose it to create something new, something which the systems he’s trying to build and enforce would deem unlawful. Based on my brief interactions with them, I can tell you that the software constructs he’s been using come from work stolen from Russian hackers, and his new system is based on stolen alien technology. The way he’s trying to enforce copyright, he’s even more guilty than the rest of us, because he’s a hypocrite.” The virtual Robot couldn’t seem to help himself from becoming long-winded in the face

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of illogic, just as Noodle remembered him, but he finally came to a partial conclusion, saying, “If he were trying to stop bootleggers or others who were profiting directly from the sale of unaltered pirated works, that would be one thing, but Villain is stopping not only economically-neutral uses, legitimate uses, and uses which promote the sort of cultural progress the Constitution wanted protected, but also all lawful uses of the Internet, most of which have nothing to do with piracy. If you have any information that could lead us to him, or point us in the direction of his servers, you must tell us, Band Manager.”

“Alright,” he replied, “I’ll tell you what I know, but you won’t like it.”

Chapter Twelve

“I’ve been in contact with Villain,” explained Band Manager, “and I can lead you to him.”

“Awesome,” said Noodle before he had an opportunity to think, “that saves us a lot of time doing research and tracking down leads. I’m glad you finally listened to reason.”

“Convincing others will not be so easy, Noodle,” warned the virtual Robot. “Someone like Villain might not be willing to listen at all, whether we’re reasonable about it or not.”

“I’m just looking forward to making some real progress on this case for a change, Robot. I’ve been stuck in one place for too long. Now we have a shortcut straight to Villain.” Noodle’s eyes seemed as dark and deep as empty sockets for a moment, and he said, “I’m not sure I care whether Villain wants to listen. Just get me in front of him.”

Watching Noodle carefully, the virtual Robot said, “We all want to find him, and we’ll take him on as a team, like we always have.” He turned back toward Band Manager’s floating video panel and asked, “Can you give me his main server’s IP address?”

“I’m afraid it won’t be so easy,” replied Band Manager. “The way he was talking about it, the area is crawling with different versions of the copyright enforcement software

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he's had developed over the years, and most of it knows who you are by now. I don't know what sort of interface you three are using, but it sticks out like a sore thumb, now that he's got Robot's heart on his side."

"It isn't in any way my heart," began the virtual Robot, but Band Manager hadn't stopped speaking at the interruption.

"You aren't going to be able to get within a mile of the place unless you disguise yourselves," said Band Manager, and the virtual Robot wanted to explain that distances in advanced information systems aren't measured in miles but are based on communication latencies and data densities which adjust their perceptions of distance and proportion algorithmically, but didn't have a chance to get a word in edgewise. "Luckily for you," continued Band Manager with a brief sideways glance, "I happen to have been given a piece of software by old Bristletuft at the UN which he said I should hand over to you in case of just such a situation."

"Do you mean Mr. Tuftworthy, or Mr. Bristlethwaite?"

"What difference does that make? It was the one in the dark suit, with the expensive shoes. What do I know?" Band Manager seemed to glance down at his own shoes for a moment, but then pressed on, saying, "He told me it was some sort of decoy. Supposed to make it look like whatever software you're using to access Villain's systems got captured by one of his own. Make it look like your software is useless and under guard, so you can get past security. Does that make any sense? I may have remembered it all wrong."

"That doesn't sound like a bad plan at all, Band Manager," said the virtual Robot coolly, "as long as you can work out how to get me a copy of the software. I know you have

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trouble sending and receiving large files. Did he tell you how to access the UN's secure systems, or shall I get you connected?"

"Oh, no, no, err... No need," said Band Manager, perhaps a bit too eagerly. "He said that if I find you, all I have to do is double-click the... Uhh..." There was a pause as Band Manager searched his computer screen for the correct icon, then the sound of the mouse being clicked was the last thing transmitted over the video feed as the panel began rapidly to expand, stretching toward them and turning black as it did. Before Noodle or his virtual companions realized what was happening, the black shape had entirely surrounded them, closing them in as it continued to change shape.

Noodle tested the dark surface and found it impassable. He looked around and saw that the program was not entirely opaque; through the smoky walls he could make out the shape of the software enclosing them. "We're inside one of the virtual Minions," he muttered.

"That's in line with what Band Manager said would happen," agreed the virtual Robot as he watched the virtual Minion finish taking shape around them. Then the substance of the walls began to contract, pressing in on them, and to mold around their bodies tightly until all three of them were entirely restrained, and the virtual Robot added, "though this level of restriction seems excessive for a mere decoy."

Unfortunately for DNGR, there was nothing they could do about it at that point but watch the virtual Minion's progress across the Internet to Villain's virtual lair. Their view was through the sunglass-like darkness of the virtual Minion's body, but as they approached their destination it seemed clear that they wouldn't have had much luck

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on their own. The Minions in the neighborhood around Villain's virtual lair were nearly as dense as they had been at the height of their earlier nearly-overwhelming battle, but in dozens of different software configurations and virtual manifestations. No single software attack from the virtual Robot could have turned the tide, and Noodle was well aware that he and Glitterfairy hadn't been up to the task of taking on such a numerous enemy. Additionally, there were no obviously distinguishing features visible from the outside of the structure they were taken to which would have told them it was any different from the hundreds of other servers in the area or anywhere else on the net. By the time they reached it, there weren't even any Minions passing in and out of it; its data flow looked like any other normal stream of packets.

Until they went inside.

Once the Minion had passed, effortlessly, through the façade, all the alien details of its interior structure became clear. Rather than an unassuming database server, they found themselves within a vast and complex digital facility which even Noodle recognized was more complex and convoluted than the entire Earthly Internet put together. Noodle could sense the ping of Robot's stolen component suddenly and clearly once they'd crossed the barrier, though it felt distant and weak; Noodle hoped he'd be able to locate it in time.

The Minion seemed to know where it was going, carrying DNGR deeper and deeper within Villain's virtual lair, and the virtual Robot spoke with the tone of voice Noodle recognized as his attempt at sarcasm, saying, "...and any minute now, this Minion disguise that Band Manager so kindly offered us will just pop open and let us save the day. Right, guys?"

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Noodle, just as sarcastic, replied, "Yeah, I'm sure it will. Good old Band Manager, always on our side." He wasn't entirely sure whether they'd actually fallen into a trap, or if they'd somehow known Band Manager had been acting more strangely than usual.

"You've got to do something about him when this is all over," offered the virtual Glitterfairy.

Noodle nodded, his arms and body too tightly held to shrug.

The Minion ignored its cargo entirely; it only continued its pre-programmed journey through the labyrinthine architecture of the Earth-and-alien-hybrid digital space. Sometimes Noodle felt the ping more clearly, as though it were nearby. Other times he was sure the ping had ceased entirely. He wondered how near to his actual destination they'd be taken, and as they made their final, spiraling approach into the deepest chambers of the lair, Noodle could tell that they were being taken very close indeed.

When the virtual Minion reached the final doorway, it wasn't able to enter on its own, and seemed to wait a while for the doors to be opened from the inside. Finally, as DNGR was carried into that innermost room, Villain's face came into view. It was not a simple two-dimensional video panel, the way Band Manager had been digitally accessible. It wasn't quite like the residual self image Noodle and his companions were wearing. Villain's face was huge, stretched out across a cylinder deformed into the rough silhouette of his face, and was perched atop a software construct similar in general appearance to the virtual Minion carrying DNGR forward. Instead of being composed of simple geometric solids like most software constructs of Earthly origin, the

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digital avatar of Villain seemed to be half infected with uncontrolled organic growths; tumors here, waving tentacles like overgrown cilia there, or just rough textures like a bad bump map painted on his otherwise-smooth limbs. The virtual Villain seemed either to be frozen solid or simply inactive; it didn't react at all to DNGR's arrival, and Villain's distorted, cartoonish face was but a grisly mask smeared across a mutant robot's body.

To the virtual Robot's utter surprise, once the Minion had reached its final destination at the feet of the giant virtual Villain, it did begin to open up. The outer layers and all the Minion-shaped structure of the enclosure folded up and disappeared. Only enough of the software remained to keep DNGR trapped. It had gotten them in, past security and right into Villain's hiding place, but not so that DNGR could bring Villain to justice—the software Band Manager had turned on them had been designed to prevent Villain's enemies from being able to use even Robot's advanced alien interface against him. Noodle felt betrayed once more by Band Manager. He knew that the virtual Robot had seen the truth of it, but Noodle had still hoped for the best.

"I guess Band Manager wasn't convinced in the slightest," sighed Noodle.

"Or he doesn't believe we can overcome forces like the RIAA, the MPAA, Congress, and my own stolen technologies," suggested the virtual Robot, "and he's trying to stay on the winning side."

"We might have been the winning side," said the virtual Glitterfairy glumly, "if he hadn't betrayed us."

"Still, we've reached Villain's virtual lair," said the virtual Robot cheerfully, "and I can feel the ping you've been

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looking for as strongly as I feel my own legs being squeezed by this contraption. Isn't this what you came in here for in the first place?"

"I suppose so," admitted Noodle. "Do you think I'm close enough to the copy? I mean, if I knew how to disconnect from the Internet and stay in my own mind, would I be close enough for your body to find it?"

The virtual Robot shook his head and said, "I'm afraid not. We should soon be near enough, as the pings are clearly coming from behind that door," and the virtual Robot cocked his head to try to indicate the direction, but there wasn't really enough freedom of movement within their restraints to communicate effectively with gestures, so he concluded, "well, the one behind Villain, that is. All we have to do is break free of these restraints so Glitterfairy and I can distract Villain long enough for you to go through those doors, and then you can see if the copy is there and whether it has what my body needs to repair itself."

"And then the two of us only need to track down Villain's real lair and stop him before he destroys the Internet, right?"

"Oh, right," said the virtual Robot, "we're meant to save the Internet, too. Not just me." He paused for a moment, screwing up his face in thought as though he were a normal, biological Earthling, then declared, "Okay, new plan. All we have to do is break free of these restraints, then you and Glitterfairy will try to distract Villain long enough for me to remotely disconnect my stolen component from the Internet. That'll kill the component's ping, but it'll also stop Villain's evil plans. Hopefully it'll stop them long enough for us to find out where he's hiding in the physical world, so

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we can actually stop him. When I'm ready to switch off the Internet, you'll have to hurry through those doors and signal me when you think you've reached the stolen component. After that, everything should be the same as what I said a minute ago. Got it?"

"I..." Noodle hesitated, once again unsure of himself. "I think so."

"Good," said the virtual Glitterfairy, "because I think we're on."

Far above them, the odd smile on Villain's avatar had grown far wider, and its eyes were even more huge. Villain's avatar leaned down to get a closer look at the prize which had been delivered to him, and all he could do was laugh. The avatar's cruel laughter was painfully loud, and it echoed around the interior of the virtual lair according to its own cruel design; Villain had developed the avatar's maniacal laugh for just such an occasion as discovering that DNGR had been effectively gift-wrapped and handed over to him. Villain laughed, and Villain's avatar laughed even more cruelly, and below the avatar, Noodle and his virtual companions struggled uselessly against the software holding them prisoner.

Chapter Thirteen

“**Y**ou should never have tried to stop me, DNGR,” said Villain’s avatar. His voice sounded as though it were being transmitted over a faulty connection, such as a piece of string strung between two tin cans. The strange face was animated as it tried to match his speech, but it was out of sync and oddly exaggerated. The least unsettling aspect of the entire avatar was its deeply troubling laughter. It continued, “If you log off and try to access my systems again through a different interface, my Minions will capture your avatars just as easily as this one did. My security is too advanced even for you, Robot, and your system’s security is protecting the secret of my true location better even than that. Stop trying to fight the system, DNGR, and accept that a real solution to the problems of copyright enforcement has finally been found.”

“You’ll never get away with all this, Villain,” accused Noodle. “The world knows what you’ve done. Even if Congress had wanted to accept your offer, how could they, knowing you had to murder innocent people to achieve your despicable goals? The blood would be on their hands, too.”

“What blood?” asked Villain’s avatar, and it began laughing again as it turned away from its prisoners dismissively. “I

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didn't see any blood on the stage when I left, and neither did anyone else." Villain's avatar walked clumsily over to a bank of complex, half-organic-looking controls and began adjusting them, looking over his shoulder occasionally as he spoke. Noodle could feel himself getting angry at Villain's self-righteous dismissal of the value of non-human life. "More to the point, it seems pretty clear to me that no one died as a result of confiscating this little piece of technology. You're all still around to make your futile little attempts at preventing my inevitable victory, aren't you?" Noodle's fist was trying to clench and unclench. His face was turning red, but noodle could feel himself on the verge of turning bone-white. Then the avatar chuckled, adding, "Which must mean the whole funeral was just for show, right? To sell a few more records? With greedy scheming like that, you should be in favor of anything I can do to enforce your copyrights further."

Death Noodle was holding his scythe in his hand; the software which had been holding him was deleted in an instant with the appearance of that deathly blade. His two virtual companions took up fighting positions at his sides. They looked to one another, communicating silently by gestures, flashing lights, flutters and sparkles, readying for their assault.

It took Villain a long time to notice DNGR was no longer trapped by his modified virtual Minion, and he kept talking as they moved swiftly and softly behind him. "Imagine what the Internet will be like once I figure out how to get this thing working. Free from piracy. Free from hate speech. Free from bullying and other unsavory activity. No longer a tool of terrorists and drug cartels. No longer a safe haven for gambling and the obscenities and indignities of

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pornography.” Villain’s avatar, and also obviously Villain himself wherever he was controlling the avatar from, was having a hard time getting the adjustments correct; while Robot’s technology was certainly capable of what he wanted, it certainly hadn’t been designed for such wholesale censoring and destruction of data and the intelligent interconnection thereof. He was totally distracted by his inability to coax evil out of the alien devices, going on, “Wholesome content from verified citizens and corporations in good standing with the law, available to exactly and only those end-users approved by the copyright holders for access. Waiting periods before anything new can be put online, to prevent even approved citizens from acting against their better interests in the heat of the moment. Most important of all, of course, is having a complete record of every citizen’s online activities, so forms of infringement not yet dreamed of may be policed, or policed retroactively!” Villain’s avatar turned around to see their agreement as he asked, “Isn’t it wonderful?”

Seeing they were no longer there, Villain began to see that they did not agree.

“Up here,” said the virtual Glitterfairy. When Villain’s avatar looked up at her, Glitterfairy unleashed a blast of rainbow sparkles that disintegrated all the strange growths on his left side and collapsed part of his torso.

Villain’s avatar lashed out at her, the powerful crushing vice of his virtual strength almost in reach of her when Death Noodle’s scythe swept through the avatar’s right ankle. Noodle had been hoping that a common code base with the virtual Minions would mean that the entire avatar would vanish as soon as his blade made contact, deleted entirely by Death’s swift blade. Unfortunately, whether due to the

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integration with alien technologies or some other modification Villain had made, the blade merely cut through the virtualized substance of the avatar's software, crippling but not deleting it.

A crippling blow was enough to get Villain's attention, though, and Death Noodle turned to make a quick getaway as Villain's avatar came crashing, tumbling, and reaching menacingly toward him. Meanwhile, the virtual Robot had begun his assault on the exposed systems of Villain's virtual lair. A swarm of digital instructions was spewing forth from him as he worked the endless rows of visible controls by hand, trying to tackle the problem from as many angles as he knew how. With the racket of Villain's avatar collapsing and screaming out in anger, of the virtual Glitterfairy's glamourbombs exploding, and of Death Noodle's scythe slicing silently through the airless virtual space of the lair, the virtual Robot was having a hard time concentrating on discerning where the Earthly technology and systems ended and his own began. The virtual Robot needed to find and examine all the edges and couplings between them so he could locate the particular pairing he needed to decouple. As he worked through the mess of redundancies, meaningless settings and adaptations, and the endless arrays of mostly self-referential systems Villain had built layer upon layer of around his component's otherwise perfectly-good systems, the virtual Robot realized that they needn't have hurried; Villain was clearly nowhere near figuring out how to get the alien technology to bend to his will like a Senate page boy.

Across the room from the virtual Robot's investigations, Death Noodle and the virtual Glitterfairy were trying to keep Villain's avatar distracted without entirely deleting

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him. “Don’t hit him too hard,” Noodle had said discretely, one moment while Villain’s avatar was down. “If we knock him offline, he might take Robot’s stolen component offline himself, and then I’ll never be able to locate the copy of it in my mind.” She’d been pulling her punches ever since, using magic which was more for show than for effect. Death Noodle had been carefully carving small chunks off the periphery of Villain’s avatar while trying to make himself look inept or overmatched.

Eventually, either figuring out what they were up to or noticing the virtual Robot out of the corner of his interface, Villain turned his avatar away from the back-and-forth. He brought the full force of his alien-technology-enhanced offensive powers to bear against the virtual Robot, firing a swarm of his own across the room. Each small piece of software appeared to be some horrifying amalgam of a sucker-covered tentacle, a patch of black mold, a many-winged insect, and an encrypted chunk of Earthly malware, and there were hundreds of them headed for the back of the virtual Robot’s head.

Before they reached their destination, several things happened, almost at once. First, unaware of the trouble headed his way, the virtual Robot had managed to find the door controls; the portal to the next room opened, giving Noodle a clear view of the digital representation of Robot’s stolen component and the loudest ping he’d felt so far. Then both Noodle and Glitterfairy did what came naturally, what they’d done the last time Villain had opened fire on Robot, and they both dove forward to try to save their friend. Once more the world slowed down for Noodle, but having seen the whole thing a couple of times before, he somehow knew

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what was coming.

He knew Glitterfairy would be the faster one, that she was throwing herself in the path of the swarm, and that she would succeed in blocking their attack on the virtual Robot. He knew he was too slow and too far away to do the same for her, or even to do more than take another ineffectual swipe at Villain's avatar before Glitterfairy could be turned to dust again. The shot was already fired, even a deadly stroke of the scythe couldn't save her.

Noodle thought back to his training, to all the lessons he'd put off, dazed through, or downright refused to attend. He watched the evil projectiles begin to impact her sparkling form, infecting her with the insidious ichor of their digital decay, watching as though examining a film of the event one still, painful frame at a time. Noodle could practically hear his father's voice as he watched, telling him, "Everything I'm trying to teach you, you already know, son. You've got Death in your bones and in your blood and in your soul." Villain's corrupting projectiles were crawling all across the virtual Glitterfairy's pain-wracked body, leaving thick slimy trails of spreading destruction in their wakes.

"Everything I can do, you'll be able to accomplish just as easily someday. It's only a matter of reminding your soul what it already knows, and that's why you've got to pay attention to these lessons." Noodle didn't want to keep thinking about the lessons he hadn't paid attention to, wondering whether there might have been some aspect of Death's power which could stay death from taking even this pale reflection of love from him, but his father's voice just kept echoing in his ears while Glitterfairy's death played out in his mind's eye and again before his own virtual eyes.

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“Whether you want it or not, you’re more than just a noodle, son. You’re also Death.” He couldn’t take it any more. He couldn’t let it happen to her again, and again, and again, while he survived. His heart ached, and his eye sockets flooded with tears, and his hoodie had somehow come up to cover his head in shadow as Death Noodle managed to exert a power of Death he was sure he couldn’t have done. He performed a basic, though effective, form of grave trade, putting one life down in place of another; saving the virtual Glitterfairy from certain doom by sacrificing himself in her stead.

The effect this had on him was not the end of his life, as such, especially under such virtual circumstances. Instead, Death Noodle found that as the crawling black things and their effects faded from Glitterfairy’s form, his own being transformed prematurely into a fully realized avatar of Death. His hoodie flowed down and out and around to become deep, enclosing robes of shadow and bone-chilling cold. His scythe grew larger and sharper. His stature grew by an even greater proportion, due to his noodly build. His pasta-like flesh was transformed into pale, sun-bleached bone, his body more skeleton than noodle and his eye sockets deeper, darker, and emptier than ever before. The external changes were mirrored by a similar sensation of his innermost self being transformed and rearranged. Death Noodle could sense that his instincts had been refined, his powers strengthened, and his compassion for the living and the dead nearly trebled. The seemingly fundamental reordering of Death Noodle’s mind had the side effect of invalidating the mapping transformations Tinkerer had laid out between Noodle’s mind and the Internet, and Robot’s body’s systems disconnected

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his mind automatically from the Internet.

All these things happened in less time than it would have taken the shot from Villain's avatar to reach and delete the virtual Robot. Luckily for DNGR and unluckily for Villain, one more thing happened in the midst of the rest of it: The virtual Robot managed to locate and disable the link between Robot's stolen component and Earth's Internet.

Villain's avatar fell lifeless to the floor, disconnected from its controller, and the room was beginning to fall apart just before the entire virtual lair disappeared from Death Noodle's vision. For a moment, Death Noodle thought he must really have died; what replaced the virtual lair looked almost exactly like his father's office. The differences were subtle, at first, but meaningful. The first obvious difference was the scale; his father's office hadn't seemed so bogglingly cavernous since Noodle had been a small child. The corners were sharper, the art more menacing, the shadows deeper and darker, but then the figure at the big desk which Death Noodle had first taken to be his actual father stood up and approached the three of them. Seeing the figure approach and being nearly overcome by the resulting reaction in his gut, Death Noodle said to the virtual Robot and virtual Glitterfairy, "We're definitely just in my mind now. I'd say somewhere deep in my subconscious. I don't feel the ping. Any ideas, guys?"

Chapter Fourteen

The new figure loomed taller than the virtual Minions, taller than Villain's avatar, and stood at least twice as tall as Death himself. The figure's resemblance to Death Noodle's father was uncanny, perhaps most strikingly in the way he also managed to resemble a giant, pale version of Robot. Death Noodle felt his eyes must be playing tricks on him, for the advancing figure to be bone and metal at once, to seem rational and instinctual at once, to be familiar and comforting and frightening and overwhelming, all at once together. Death Noodle had recognized the figure immediately, having never seen such an amalgam before.

The virtual Robot was able to make sense of him too, saying, "It appears you see me as a sort of father figure, Noodle. I hope it's because I'm like the father you wish you'd had, and not because I remind you of the father who scared you as much as all this."

"If this is what you think of your father," said the virtual Glitterfairy softly, "I'm not surprised you aren't interested in taking up the family business. Who wants to become a monster when they grow up?"

"I don't see him as a monster," replied Death Noodle, "not really. And I don't see you as a monster either, Robot."

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It's just that you always seem to wise, so experienced, and so in control of yourself no matter the situation. It's hard not to look up to you."

Having crossed the exaggeratedly large room at last, the menacing figure raised its arm and pointed a single, long, bony, metallic finger at Death Noodle and began to shout angrily at him, "Despite everything I've tried to teach you, you've learned nothing! You've got no substance! No depth! There's nothing to you but a noodle-shaped sack of blood and bones and spit."

"Does he really talk to you that way?" asked the virtual Glitterfairy.

Death Noodle began to shake his head, but still felt everything the dark figure had said was true, and his shake turned unconsciously into a nod.

The virtual Robot said, "This thing is like us, Noodle. It isn't real. It's only a projection of your mind based on your thoughts and fears and memories. Don't let it get to you. Your real father loves you. We all do."

The virtual, robotic Death continued to berate Death Noodle loudly, shouting, "No matter what I do, no matter how much I try, you'll never learn to accomplish even a tiny fraction of what I'm able to do."

"Are you just going to let it talk to you like that?" asked the virtual Robot when the shouting figure paused for breath.

"What else am I supposed to do? It's just some digital simulation of your body's interpretation of my unconscious fears and anxiety about my relationship with my father. What good would confronting it do?"

"You never pay attention to your lessons, and you re-

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fuse to pay attention to your true nature; no matter how many times I try to mold you into something else, you'll never be more than a limp, wet noodle," the robotic, virtual Death continued.

"Think about what good it would do for you, Noodle," said the virtual Glitterfairy. "For you to confront this anxiety you've been carrying around."

"Think about why we're here," suggested the virtual Robot, "in this place, in this part of your mind. Why do you suppose we found ourselves surrounded by these thoughts, instead of any of the millions of others you're carrying around in that noodle of yours?"

"The copy should be nearby!" shouted Death Noodle.

"Whether you like it or not, boy, you're nothing more than a noodle!" shouted his distorted father figure.

"Will you shut up? I'm trying to think!" Death Noodle's deathly gaze fell across the ersatz Death and it began to wither and gray, but it did not stop accusing.

"You'll never amount to anything meaningful in this life! Your so-called music is a waste of everyone's time!"

"Why would Robot have hidden the copy anywhere near this thing?" asked Death Noodle, looking away.

"I'm not sure you're even mine! I see nothing of myself in you!"

"Because it's the last place you'd look," suggested the virtual Glitterfairy. "You can't stand to look at it."

"It doesn't matter. It isn't real!" insisted Death Noodle.

"I wish you had never been born!"

"Tell him that," said the virtual Glitterfairy. She put her tiny hand on the dark elbow of Death Noodle's voluminous

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robes and turned him gently back to face the virtual face of his own self-doubts.

“You have no discipline! You’re a waste of good pasta!”

“Don’t try to talk to me about discipline! I’ve mastered dozens of musical instruments! And you aren’t even real!” Death Noodle shouted sincerely at the monster he’d been keeping at the back of his mind all his life, his dark gaze falling heavily upon it. “My father was never like this. He was always encouraging me, always certain of my destiny. I was the one who had doubts. I’m the one who didn’t think I was good enough.”

As though its large size had been a trick of perspective, the increasingly-withered ersatz Death seemed to be shrinking in their perception. Still, it shouted, though softer as it shrank, “If you had doubts, they were well-founded, boy! Look what’s become of you! You failed to save your friends, you failed to save the world, and you sacrificed your life to save a piece of software pretending to be the girl you loved and let die! You can’t even commit meaningless suicide correctly!”

“I’ve saved the world countless times,” said Death Noodle, standing taller and straighter as his confidence grew, “and I’m trying to save one of my friends’ lives right now, but another meaningless piece of software is getting in my way! My love for Glitterfairy is not a weakness. Self-sacrifice, especially when one knows that death is not nearly their end, is noble.” He gestured around at the faux-menacing room and said, “And look where it got me; my sacrifice brought me straight to you.”

The dark figure had reduced in size enough that all three of them had to look down at him as he shouted,

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scarcely louder than a whining child, "You just needed another lesson, boy! You came to me because you were lost and afraid without me!"

"You still aren't my father," replied Death Noodle, shaking his head, "and while I'll admit that I do need to start spending more time with my real father, it isn't because I don't know how to get by without him. I've proven time and again that I can stand on my own two feet and that I can contribute to the team, with or without the use of the powers I inherited from him. Death isn't the end-all be-all of the universe, and you're not nearly the man my father is." Death Noodle took a deep breath, held it a moment, then exhaled, saying, "I'm not afraid of you any more. I just hadn't realized it yet. Thank you for reminding me I'm not just a Noodle. I'm Death Noodle," and he swung his scythe low and sliced the halfling-sized false Death in half.

The two halves fell to the floor like empty cloth, revealing a beautiful, multi-faceted crystal the exact same hue as Crystal Unicorn's horn. It was about the size of a watermelon, and as soon as it was revealed the virtual Robot responded, "I pick the best hiding places."

Death Noodle stared at the glimmering crystal, scarcely noticing his surroundings gradually fading to a cloudy gray emptiness all around them, feeling proud of himself for facing down his own doubts and fears. Knowing that the copy of Robot's consciousness must be locked inside the crystal, Death Noodle felt triumphant. He had triumphed in locating the copy. He hoped he was about to triumph in the quest to restore his friend to life. Most of all, Death Noodle felt triumphant in his self-actualization, not as just a noodle but as the Death Noodle he was truly meant to be. He replied,

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“Can you get that thing open?”

“I’m already on it. You may have a chance to save me, and the rest of the world, after all.” The tiny crystalline fragments of the decryption program were peeling away from the virtual Robot’s body and swarming around the large crystal, organizing and reorganizing themselves to adapt to its hidden inner structure. After only a few seconds of forming beautifully intersecting, rotating, and transforming fractal-line structures, the small cloud of data decryptors settled into a steady rhythm. Then they vanished, and the crystal began to shift hues. When its color had traversed two thirds of light’s full spectrum, the crystal vanished. Then the virtual Glitterfairy and the virtual Robot vanished. For a brief moment, Death Noodle was alone in what felt like a dense cloud of gray fog.

Then Glitterfairy and Robot appeared again before him, and the breath caught in Death Noodle’s throat.

The two of them were checking out their surroundings, Glitterfairy looking up and down at herself and tentatively touching her own body as though she didn’t believe she was real, and Robot was doing his normal scans and analyses of any new or unknown setting.

Death Noodle stuttered, asking, “Both of— I mean, are you? Y-y-y-you’re copies of them, right? Created as a result of the Crystal Unicorn ordeal?”

“Not just copies, Noodle,” said Glitterfairy, hovering over to him and taking his hand in hers, “it’s really us.”

Death Noodle shook his head, saying, “B-but we’re still in a simulation. So you aren’t really you.”

Robot explained, “I believe the answer lies somewhere in between your expectations and your hopes, Noodle. Our

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existence is due to the events of the Crystal Unicorn ordeal. My analysis of the incomplete data set available to me in this environment indicates that our consciousnesses were not precisely copied; the quantum entanglement between our minds seems instead of have allowed us to bridge higher-order multi-dimensional space with the lower-order spaces we normally occupy, creating the illusion that our minds existed in multiple noncontiguous locations simultaneously, which we interpreted as multiple copies, the alternative of noncontiguous bridging of higher- and lower-order spaces being heretofore unknown to this universe.”

“Uhh... huh,” replied Death Noodle, trying unsuccessfully to make sense of what he’d just heard.

Robot recognized the look on his and Glitterfairy’s faces, and tried to be clearer, saying, “We were never copied. Our minds were simply expanded in a way that allowed each of our minds to be within ourselves and within each other at the same time. When we died, no longer possessing the appropriate connections to our own bodies, the entirety of both of our consciousnesses were still safely a part of you. We’ve been with you the entire time.” Glitterfairy was nodding.

“So, you’re really you?”

She continued nodding, and said, “And I love you, too, Death Noodle.”

“What?”

“When he said we’d been with you the entire time,” Glitterfairy explained, “he meant it. Since our bodies died our only anchor on the world was you, and we were experiencing the world through the refracted light of your perceptions. We felt your sadness. We witnessed your attempts to

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repair Robot on your own. We saw and heard and felt everything you did, right up until the moment we were released.”

“So you heard...”

Glitterfairy squeezed Death Noodle’s hand and repeated, “Yes, my Noodle, and I love you, too. Even if you are a lot more like your father than you prefer to admit.”

Death Noodle pulled Glitterfairy into his embrace, and his deathly visage automatically softened into his normal, noodly face as he leaned in to kiss her, giving him the lips required for making a kiss possible. Streams of sparks, blasts of rainbow light, and a spray of glitter erupted from the passion of their first kiss. As they slowly separated, they were both looking forward to many more.

Glad that things seemed to be going even better than his best expectations since their deaths, Death Noodle asked Robot, “Will you be able to repair your body, now, so we can all take on Villain together in the real world?”

“Repair systems were activated the instant the crystal was decrypted,” replied Robot. “My body will be fully restored and operational within a matter of minutes, and I have operational protocols in place for reseating my consciousness within it after such a breach. Unfortunately, the same cannot be said for Glitterfairy. She has no body to go back to, and even if she did I wouldn’t know how to transfer the seat of her consciousness to it. Perhaps if we were on my home world we could have a new body designed for her, or if it were safe to contact Crystal Unicorn she could help us recreate the incident which linked us all in the first place, but neither of those things are possible. I’m sorry.”

“Won’t she be safe in my mind, for the time being?” asked Death Noodle. “Until we can come up with a way to

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restore her body?”

Robot shook his head, replying, “None of us is really safe with us staying in your mind any more, now that the protection and filters of the crystal have been removed. Within a few hours our minds will be irreversibly united into a single consciousness, as though there had only ever been you, Death Noodle, and we had been your imaginary friends. In fact, once you leave this simulation you won’t even be aware Glitterfairy’s mind is within you; you’ll never be able to see or speak to her again after this.”

Chapter Fifteen

Death Noodle was paralyzed by the thought of losing Glitterfairy all over again. His heart didn't know which direction to beat. Learning she hadn't really, fully died had been a shock, but learning in the next breath how she'd soon be well and truly gone had sent him into a painful downward spiral of emotions. Death Noodle wasn't sure he'd be able to live with the idea that the path he'd taken to try to save Robot had stolen Glitterfairy's only opportunity for survival.

Then he had an idea. Death Noodle asked Robot, "We aren't experiencing time at its normal rate in here, are we?"

"The experience of time is just like that of space in this place, expanding and contracting to optimize the interface between perception and relevant data interactions," he replied. "Your mind does something similar, continuously modifying your perception of the passage of time to suit your real-world circumstances, the common Earth idiom 'time flies when you're having fun' being part of the oft-overlooked evidence of this everyday phenomenon. The effect is multiplied by several orders of magnitude here, but your mind ought to be adaptable to it; are you experiencing temporal-perceptual complications, Death Noodle?"

"No, no, nothing like that. I was just thinking..." Death

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Noodle gazed again into Glitterfairy's sparkling eyes, then continued, "When you said we had minutes to hours before the two of you would be lost for good, you meant real minutes and hours, right? Not as time is perceived in here, but as it is measured on the outside, right?"

"Of course. If you'd like me to generate a statistical probability matrix to give a more tightly defined forecast, I can get to work on developing a model for it."

"I was just thinking that, if this is the last chance Glitterfairy and I will ever have to be together, it might be nice to make the most of it. It seemed like milliseconds in here felt as long as minutes, so Glitterfairy and I ought to be able to share weeks or months together in any setting I've experienced or imagined, just by staying in this simulation of the contours of my mind." Death Noodle looked from Robot to Glitterfairy, smiled, and said, "I'll return to the real world later. Reality can wait. Taking over the family business can wait. I'm staying here, with you, for as long as I'm able."

"I don't think that's going to work out the way you're hoping, Death Noodle," advised Robot.

"I think it's a great idea," said Glitterfairy, squeezing Death Noodle's hand. "Villain had your component for days before he got it online in the first place, and the version of Robot from your memory deactivated that capability. He'll be fighting with it for weeks. We can afford to take a few hours to say goodbye."

"Villain isn't the immediate problem," began Robot.

Death Noodle didn't let him finish, saying, "This is my last chance, Robot. You said so yourself. As soon as I disconnect, that's it. I'll never see her again. Wouldn't you have taken the opportunity to spend a few more hours

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—especially if they felt like weeks or months— with your wife, if you could?”

“Of course I would have,” said Robot, “and I’m not suggesting that it wasn’t a good idea. I wish it were possible.”

“Is there some technical reason we can’t? If the problem is that traveling around in my memories could damage my mind, we can stay right here in this void.”

“I don’t think your memories would be any more at risk by our visiting them this way than they are when you remember something by traditional means, but there are a few technical hurdles standing in the way of such an extended goodbye.”

“Nothing DNGR can’t overcome, I’m sure,” replied Glitterfairy. “Through the combination of our unique and complimentary gifts and skills and the limitless strength of Christ, we can accomplish anything. We’ve proved it again and again. What could possibly prevent us from doing a simple thing like taking the proper time to say goodbye to one another?”

“Events already set in motion, I’m afraid,” said Robot, “though perhaps one last, desperate battle for survival against the forces of evil will be a fair stand-in for whatever relaxing, imaginary vacation you two had in mind.”

“What do you mean? Who could threaten us from inside my own mind?” asked Death Noodle, gesturing at the blank grey space all around them. As though triggered by the sweep of his arm, details began to fill into the background, a familiar environment slowly coming to clarity as though a blinding fog were clearing all around them. “What’s going on?” he asked, though he could still understand the digital systems and processes as though he’d been born into a digital

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world, and understood what he was seeing without accepting it.

“We’re back online, aren’t we?” asked Glitterfairy, unconsciously releasing Death Noodle’s hand and flitting a little higher, rising to a more defensible position.

“That is only the first hurdle we must overcome, I’m sorry to say, and there was nothing I could do to prevent it from where we were. The software Tinkerer used to map your mind to the Internet only had to finish mapping your transformed mind before it could put you back online; it doesn’t know we’ve accomplished what you came in here for, just its own role in facilitating your mission.”

They could see the inner sanctum of Villain’s virtual lair taking shape all around them, though Villain’s half-mangled avatar was nowhere to be seen. The three of them automatically began to shift into a defensive formation as they continued talking. Death Noodle asked, “How many other hurdles do we have to look forward to, Robot?”

“The most important is probably that Glitterfairy’s mind isn’t the only one at risk,” he replied as the final details of the slowly-crumbling virtual lair finished appearing around them. “If we don’t get you logged out before my body is finished repairing itself, you may end up disconnected from your own body as my consciousness comes online and automatically purges Tinkerer’s access to my systems. Such a disconnection could result in your mind simply being reunited with your body, or it could kill your body and leave only an unstable remnant of your minds floating around the Internet as you both gradually degenerate into so much digital flotsam. You’d get your chance to say goodbye as you slowly evaporated from existence, but it wouldn’t be pleasant and

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then you'd both be dead."

The big door which led into Villain's innermost lair opened, and a half-dozen virtual Minions came streaming in toward DNGR. Death Noodle asked, "I suppose the other hurdle is that we have to survive long enough to log off properly, right?" He extended his arm and his scythe reappeared in his hand; he swung the blade back and forth in front of him, feeling the virtual weight of it in his bony, noodly hands.

"I'd consider that a sub-hurdle of the other major hurdle," replied Robot, a half-dozen insectoid packets flying from him to the approaching virtual Minions, "which is that in order to get you safely disconnected from the kludge of an interface Tinkerer put together, we've got to get back across the Internet to Tinkerer's system. So what we need to survive is escaping Villain's lair, traversing the Internet, and defending Tinkerer's server from Villain's Minions while your mind is safely disconnected and your mind-body connection is re-initialized." One of the virtual Minions was stopped in its tracks by Robot's query, but the other five packets seemed simply to bounce back, returning to Robot with whatever information they'd received from the interaction.

Glitterfairy threw a blast of destructive, sparkling magic at the leading virtual Minions and said, "I suppose saving your life will have to be my goodbye, Death Noodle." Two of the virtual Minions were blasted to pieces, but the other three continued their advance.

Death Noodle, feeling more powerful and confident since his transformation and subsequent confrontation with self-doubt, struck down two of the remaining virtual Minions with a single slice of his scythe's blade and disintegrated the other with a quick and careful application of his

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deathly gaze. "I'm not sure what my father would do if we let me die because of a computer problem," he said, "though I doubt staying dead would even be considered." He began leading them to the still-open door, adding, "Still, he'd probably force me to watch Villain succeed and the world come undone, just to teach me a lesson about treating life so carelessly. We'd best be on our way."

Robot and Glitterfairy followed Death Noodle out the door and were struck by the sight which greeted them on the other side: They were deep in the heart of Villain's virtual lair, and the speed at which it was crumbling after the disconnection of Robot's stolen component was only unmatched by the rate of destruction being dished out by hundreds of thousands of virtual Minions out of control. The place was vast, and complex, and full of enemies, and it was coming to pieces.

"I guess Villain must have been using the stolen component to help keep his Minions under control," observed Robot.

"Do either of you remember which direction we came in from?" asked Glitterfairy.

Robot surveyed the destruction around him and declared, "That path no longer exists."

"If we keep to a straight course we'll eventually reach a border, right?" asked Death Noodle, looking to Robot for confirmation. Robot nodded, and Death Noodle indicated a direction with his scythe. "Then let's try this way." He forged ahead, and Robot and Glitterfairy followed.

Within almost no time at all, they were spotted by some of the out of control Minions, and attacked. Unlike the ones they'd been fighting off outside the lair, these Minions were

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equipped with more than simple scanners. They fought back. Some fired dangerous malware projectiles. Some grappled, using dozens of tentacle-like limbs, attempting to restrain DNGR so other Minions could attack. Some attempted to crush or consume DNGR with their huge fists and mouths. Some bombarded DNGR with data packets intended to confuse, transform, or otherwise interfere with them, as though they were any other piece of simple software. Many of them appeared to be incomplete, or to be operating in a diminished capacity, apparently having been enhanced by some technology no longer available with the disappearance of Robot's stolen component from the network.

Working together, DNGR was more than up to the task of defending themselves against the attacks and tactics of the virtual Minions, though the geometrically-increasing number of Minions aware of their presence led to a matching reduction in their progress toward the edge of Villain's virtual lair. There were limits on how many Minions could crowd around the three of them in the simulated three-dimensional space, so DNGR was never facing more than a couple dozen actual threats at once. Perhaps not aware of the debilitating effects their scans could have on sapient beings, and without seeming to have any directive requiring that they know what they were trying to destroy, none of the virtual Minions were bothering with the only distance attack they possessed which might have given them an edge.

It took a long time, and a lot of effort, and thousands of Minions were disabled or deleted in the process, but eventually DNGR reached the border and crossed over to the Internet at large. For some reason, none of the virtual Minions followed them out. What they found on the outside was

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more of the same wanton destruction they'd seen inside; the virtual Minions were less numerous on the outside, but they were just as reckless and destructive. Glancing behind him at the server, Death Noodle observed, "Not so well hidden any more, is it?"

Glitterfairy and Robot turned around to see that the façade which had made Villain's virtual lair appear to fit in perfectly with its digital neighborhood had also been a casualty of the disconnection of Robot's stolen component. "That would have been pretty obvious," said Glitterfairy, sending out streamers of destructive rainbow at the virtual Minions which had seen them exit Villain's servers.

"Even without half a million deranged programs swarming around inside," said Robot, expressing a stream of conflicting instructions at another group of malicious Minions.

"Which way to Tinkerer's from here?" asked Death Noodle, surveying the entire Internet in a glance and realizing he seemed to know the answer before Robot gave it. Robot pointed at a speck of data in the distance which Death Noodle's borrowed intuitive comprehension of digital realities had identified for him, too. Death Noodle took Glitterfairy's hand and, hoping he knew what he was doing, used the same sort of hyperlink-style travel Robot had demonstrated earlier, carrying the two of them directly and almost instantly to their destination.

Robot appeared beside them a split-moment later, saying, "They're right behind me." He was right; the unfettered and deranged Minions from the neighborhood around Villain's virtual lair wasted no time in giving up whatever local destruction they'd been wreaking. They began appearing all around DNGR, more and more following

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one another in a seemingly endless stream, dividing up at random to target not just the three of them but also all the servers in the address space adjacent to Tinkerer's server. Robot immediately began building an additional firewall around Tinkerer's server, to try to protect it from the virtual Minions' seemingly unstoppable wave of destruction. Glitterfairy continued blasting away with her magic and Death Noodle continued swinging away with his scythe as they backed toward Tinkerer's server.

"Should we go in?" Death Noodle asked Robot. "Or will we be deleted along with the server's data when they breach it? How long will it take us to do what we need to do in there?"

Robot was dividing his attention between watching the situation develop and constructing a set of software defenses which he thought would be up to the task of defending them. He waved Death Noodle and Glitterfairy back a few extra steps, to be sure they were on the inside before the firewall initialized, switched it on, then said, "It's safe to go in, now."

"Are you sure? Won't they be able to get through, if enough of them attack at once?"

"Absolutely," said Robot. "That's why I've given them this doorway." As the three of them backed out of the no-man's-land between Robot's firewall and Tinkerer's firewall, Robot was pulling what appeared to be a large cylinder behind him, extending it between the firewalls to create a passage between them. Once they were safely inside the familiar confines of Tinkerer's systems, Robot explained, "They'll get through the outside door within a few seconds, and the door on this end not long afterward, but then we'll just have

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to deal with a single-file stream of Minions instead of the entire server collapsing around us.”

“You think they’ll just line up at the door and wait their turn to be destroyed?” asked Glitterfairy.

Robot nodded, “Yeah, they seemed pretty single-minded and easily distracted, back in Villain’s system. You should be able to cover the door by yourself while Death Noodle and I work on getting him safely out of the system. Don’t hesitate to holler if you start to get overwhelmed.”

“I guess this is goodbye,” said Death Noodle, taking Glitterfairy’s hands in his and trying not to cry as he looked her one last time in the eyes.

“I guess so,” she said. “I’m glad we got a chance for goodbye, even if it is in circumstances like this. Last time I died, you didn’t even know I love you.”

“I should have said something sooner,” he began, but Glitterfairy put her arms around him, drawing Death Noodle into a hug that silenced him. Death Noodle’s newfound digital senses told him that the outer door had been breached, and he knew their time was drawing short. He pulled Glitterfairy into a deep kiss to try to keep himself from breaking into tears. Death Noodle poured his entire being into that kiss, trying to communicate everything he’d never been able to tell Glitterfairy over the years through the connection of their shared passion for one another; she did the same, trying to give everything she had left over to him, knowing it was her last chance. When finally they broke their embrace, an instant before the inner door was breached, Death Noodle whispered into Glitterfairy’s ear, “Don’t forget I love you.”

“Don’t forget I love you,” she replied, and then she had

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to fly up into the air in an instant and begin fighting off the oncoming hordes of virtual Minions. She shouted down at him, “Now go! Save Robot. Stop Villain. Save the world. I believe in you, and I’ll see you on the other side.”

He nodded at her, turned, and followed Robot over to where Tinkerer’s systems were interfaced with those of the truck. Death Noodle asked Robot, “So what do we do now? How do we disconnect me from this thing?”

“We can’t,” Robot replied after examining the interface, “not from inside. Tinkerer has to initiate it from his end. I didn’t realize he’d send you in without giving you a way out. Did he tell you how to signal him?”

Death Noodle shook his head, remembering how quickly things had gone once Tinkerer had come up with the idea. He said, “By the time I thought to ask, I was already inside.”

Chapter Sixteen

“That presents a bit of a problem,” concluded Robot. “I’ll see if I can find any way to contact him from here.”

Death Noodle was anxious. He watched Robot scanning and digitally interacting with Tinkerer’s systems, but he felt trapped and hopeless. He turned to watch Glitterfairy fighting off the nonstop stream of virtual Minions, and felt pinned down; he knew there was no way out of Tinkerer’s system, and no other safe harbor to retreat to if they managed to crash his servers. “What does that mean? If you can’t find a way to reach him, we all die?”

“Perhaps,” replied Robot. “Try to focus on defending the server, for now. I’ll keep looking for a way to reach Tinkerer.”

Robot wanted to distract Death Noodle, and to keep from being distracted. Death Noodle could sense the systems of Robot’s body coming online, one at a time, and knew his time was short. He also knew there wasn’t really anything he could do to improve their odds on the software end of the battle, so he turned instead to fight side by side with the woman he loved for what he knew would be the last time.

“Is there a problem?” asked Glitterfairy, when Death

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Noodle began slicing through every other virtual Minion to come through the doorway.

“We can’t disconnect me from inside,” explained Death Noodle. “Tinkerer has to do it from out there. Robot’s trying to find a way to contact him.”

“How much time does he have?”

“Not long. I can somehow sense his body coming on-line. If I’m not out in the next few moments, I think I’m stuck. I don’t mind sacrificing my life to save his, but getting this far only to fail is almost as frustrating as losing you a second time.”

“If you don’t make it out, maybe we can get that extra time together.”

“Yeah, maybe,” sighed Death Noodle, his deathly gaze deleting a line of virtual Minions straight back through the doorway and beyond. “We can fade away together as our minds are slowly dissolved into so much digital noise.”

“Keep your chin up, Noodle,” said Glitterfairy. “We’re still together, and we’re still alive, so we’ve got a fighting chance. DNGR has been through worse than this.” She floated down to give him a peck on the cheek in the peace before the next wave of virtual Minions made their way through the doorway. Death Noodle couldn’t help but smile.

While Death Noodle and Glitterfairy were guarding the doorway into Tinkerer’s systems, Robot was having no luck trying to get Tinkerer’s attention. He didn’t know whether Tinkerer were simply away from his computer or somehow failing to understand the information Robot was forcing onto his screens, but he wasn’t getting any response. Robot was more acutely aware of his body’s systems coming online than Death Noodle, his consciousness being reseeded

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in his body along the way. Then, just as Glitterfairy was moving down to kiss Death Noodle on his bony cheek, Robot felt the familiar sensation of being in two places at once.

Still experiencing and interacting with the digital world, Robot was also partially able to perceive the world through his body's senses. Being able to split his concentration between the physical and digital worlds was a commonplace enough occurrence in Robot's life, since he frequently had to access and alter digital information systems while the rest of life went on, but he could not remember his physical body ever being the one to be gradually connecting while his digital one was fully active; it was normally the other way around. He tried controlling his incompletely-revived body, with limited results.

First Robot managed to open his eyes, and to blink. A few moments later he was able to run a low-level diagnostic of his internal sensors. Then his toes wiggled, and his fingers tingled, and his nose itched. Robot tried to sit up, and felt his knees bending instead. He tried to sit back down, and felt his legs straighten out. He ran a diagnostic on his gross motor control, and felt his satellite connections come online before it could complete. His sense of smell turned on at full sensitivity, and Robot was sure Tinkerer was still in the lab. He tried to speak, but his voice came out in an encrypted stream above human hearing—closer to his native tongue than any Earthly form of communication.

Death Noodle took a break from casually fighting off the inept horde of Minions to ask Robot, "Did you say something?"

"Did you hear me say something?"

"It sounded like..." Death Noodle hesitated. He tried

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to fix his mind on what he'd heard, but it didn't make sense since in his memory he could only recall hearing a strange, high-pitched squealing. He continued, "I thought you were calling for Tinkerer, telling him we needed his help. Did you get through to him?"

"My body is starting to come online. I was trying to activate my body's vocal systems. I was not successful, but I believe I may have wiggled my toes."

"Do you think you'll have control of your body before I get cut off?"

"I apologize, Death Noodle. I have never been through a system restore quite like this before, and cannot seem to predict what order my components will come online. Network diagnostics are supposed to come before digital motor control and after plasma flow regulators are reset, but my fingers and toes are online and my plasma flow feels sluggish, almost erratic. I wish I had better news, but things aren't looking good for you right now."

"And you're sure there's nothing you can do on your own? You can't put up a video stream for Tinkerer like you did for Band Manager?"

Robot shook his head, and felt his body's head mimic the motion, his neck servos coming online. He said, "Tinkerer's system doesn't have the appropriate software installed, and with the extra firewall and the assault I can't just pull a copy of something from the Internet without endangering the whole server." Robot felt a whole array of real-world sensors cycle off and on again, and was feeling the physical world in an almost entirely complete way. His digital manifestation flickered briefly, and he pondered aloud, "I suppose it's possible that I might get control of the relevant components

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before they run through the appropriate diagnostics and reset. It's totally against protocols, but nothing else seems to be going as expected, so there's certainly a chance."

Death Noodle lowered his voice, stepping a little closer to Robot to ask, "Is there any chance you'll be able to make a backup of Glitterfairy?" He cleared his throat. "Tinkerer told me you don't normally consider backups ethical, but what about a matter of life and death? Do you have a system which might accommodate her and escape—" Death Noodle's voice trailed off at the sight of Robot's manifestation shifting rapidly through a series of random colors and distorted proportions. When he seemed back to normal, Death Noodle asked, "Are you alright? Are you still with us?"

Robot looked somehow drowsy, but replied, "I'm alright. I'm still here, for now, and so are you. I thought that was going to be it; my body just recalibrated the systems for connecting me to this perceptual space, and I thought you'd be kicked before you finished your sentence." After a pause, he added, "I feel like something is interfering with my cooling and ventilation systems. I hope it's just a calibration error."

"It sounds like you're having a lot of those. Are you sure you'll be alright? Is this something to do with reseating your consciousness?"

Robot shrugged. He indicated Glitterfairy by cocking his head in her direction and said, "Go. Be with her while you're both still here. I'll do whatever I can, but this might be the end of all of us. It couldn't hurt to pray."

"If any of us get out of this situation alive, it'll be by the grace of God," Death Noodle agreed, nodding. He returned to Glitterfairy's side; she hadn't had any trouble fending off

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the steady but single-file stream of opponents on her own, but was glad to see his return. Death Noodle looked up to Glitterfairy and said, "Robot suggested we pray."

"How could I stop praying, in a place like this? How do you think we've made it this far?"

Death Noodle just smiled, rejoining her defensive efforts.

Robot was glad to see them smiling, but was worried he wouldn't be able to see either of his friends smiling again if he couldn't get control of his body. He could see and he could hear and he could smell, and Robot was fairly certain that Tinkerer was within a few feet of his body, asleep. Robot remembered seeing Tinkerer passed out over his workbench or computer keyboard before, so caught up in his work that he'd failed to notice exhaustion catching up with him. Robot hoped he'd be able to rouse the old man in time.

He tried wiggling his toes again, and found them unresponsive. He tried intentionally turning his head, and found his vision turning toward the wall without turning back; Robot could only manage to turn his head one way. Robot felt his plasma flow regulators resetting, and knew that with his energy level restored he didn't have much time left. He tried his voice again. A definite croak reached Robot's ears. He tried shouting, hoping to be loud enough to wake Tinkerer up, even if he couldn't yet form comprehensible language. A sound somewhere between a record scratch and a lion's roar echoed off the wall Robot was facing, and the noisy clattering sound of Tinkerer falling out of his chair after being startled awake followed close behind.

"Robot?" Tinkerer asked after regaining his footing. Robot saw the world turning and felt Tinkerer's hands ro-

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tating his head back around to face him. "Has Noodle been successful? Why hasn't he logged out and let me know?" Tinkerer was poking at Robot's chest, the formerly open and empty hole filled and closed up by Robot's automated self-repairs. "Quite the mechanical wonder, you are. Fixed yourself right up while I was fast asleep. Wish the rest of this junk was half as useful."

Robot made another unintelligible noise, wishing he could explain the dire situation unfolding in Tinkerer's own computer network. On the inside, he called out to Death Noodle, "I've got his attention! I can't seem to form any words, yet, but maybe I can get him to look at what's going on in here." Robot sensed system after system within his mind and body being restored and reconnected and recalibrated and reset; if he'd had a proper pulse, it would have been racing with the fear that they were cutting things a little too close. If he'd have looked beyond the layers of firewall around them, Robot would have seen they were cutting things quite closely indeed; the system was completely surrounded by virtual Minions, and they weren't just waiting their turn to get in line and get deleted—they were breaking down the walls.

"Perhaps not right as rain, after all, eh?" Tinkerer gave Robot a thoughtful look, then returned to his computer to see whether he could work out what was wrong. His fingers danced at the keyboard, and he muttered, "Interesting, interesting..." He heard another noise escape Robot, and almost thought it sounded like the word 'noodle'; a moment later he said, "I suppose Noodle must have forgotten how to log himself out. Let me just..."

Death Noodle sat up suddenly with a loud gasp, his real

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lungs sucking the first real air he was aware of for what felt like hours. A split second later, Tinkerer's screen went dark as the Minions' attacks overwhelmed it, crashing his entire server cluster. Robot finally had enough control of his body to sit up and turn to face Death Noodle. At first he spoke in a low, strange voice, saying, "Testing, testing," and then in his normal tone of voice he said, "I think we did it, Death Noodle. You saved—" Robot stopped mid-sentence. The light went out of his eyes. His body crashed backward onto the table, inert.

Death Noodle stood, tried to cross over to Robot, and fell to his knees, disoriented. He wasn't used to controlling his own body any more, to feeling his own senses, to being in the real world. Death Noodle barely managed to keep from landing flat on his face. Tinkerer stood and crossed to him, helping Death Noodle back to sit on the couch he'd been laying on. "You need to give yourself time to recover, Noodle. You aren't looking so good, right now." Tinkerer didn't attempt to understand or explain how Death Noodle had grown taller, changed his clothes, and become frighteningly skeletal for a noodle while unconsciously inhabiting a digital representation of his own mental space overlaid with that of the Internet. Instead he switched on his electric kettle and began to prepare a new pot of tea.

Before the hopped-up kettle even had a chance to boil, there was a noise from the front of the shop. Tinkerer called out to whoever had come in, "We're closed!"

Then there was someone banging on the back door, too.

Within seconds, a dozen of Villain's Minions burst from the front of the shop into Tinkerer's work area, and

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the back door exploded into the room, its lock blown off by more Minions coming in from the alley. “What do you think you’re doing?” asked Tinkerer, but the Minions ignored the old man, heading directly for Death Noodle and Robot.

Robot was inert, and while it took eight Minions to lift him from the workbench, he didn’t move to stop them or protest in any way. Death Noodle was still disoriented, feeling things he was sure he shouldn’t be feeling and uncomfortable with the senses he’d had his whole life. When a pair of Minions lifted him up by his arm pits and led him out of the shop, he was glad they were there to support his weight, as he wasn’t quite ready to walk, yet. Once they were all outside, the Minions fired up their jetpacks and all of them rose into the air together.

Chapter Seventeen

Looking down at the city's details shrinking below him, Death Noodle felt like he'd lost everything. As Tinker's building vanished from sight, it seemed just another in a long list of hopeful possibilities stolen away from him. The first time Glitterfairy had been killed, Death Noodle had been devastated. Losing her again and again was turning his attempts at grief and recovery into a Sisyphean punishment. Risking everything, fighting his way across the Internet, into the heart of Villain's digital stronghold, battling his own inner demons, and then doing it all again in reverse to try to save Robot had apparently been for naught; Death Noodle didn't know how he knew, but somehow he could sense that Robot's systems were at least as electronically inert as they'd been when he was first struck down by Villain's evil extraction. He had nearly been saved, but was once again dead. Perhaps worst of all was the thought that Glitterfairy's consciousness might still be alive somewhere within him, but rapidly be fading from individual existence as his own mind absorbed hers completely. Death Noodle could almost accept the fact that Villain was clearly winning the day, knowing that he'd been so close to making something of his love for her only to have his own unconscious mind be the thing

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which destroyed her in the end.

By the time the twinkling lights of the city had shrunk down to a speck disappearing over the horizon, Death Noodle had come to the conclusion he had nothing left to lose.

For most of his life, Death Noodle had been careful with his powers, always reluctant to actually take a life, even when other lives were under threat. He'd held himself back in part because he didn't want to become his father, in part because he was afraid of falling short of his father's expectations, but largely because he believed it was part of the role of the just to restrain themselves from the immoral excesses of the unjust. With his friends murdered and the fate of the world on the line, Death Noodle felt himself cross over that line.

He wanted justice, but more than that he wanted vengeance. He wanted Villain to pay for what he'd done. He wanted to take his fully-matured powers as an avatar of Death, and he wanted to turn them against Villain. Death Noodle wanted to make the senator pay for what he'd done, and he wanted payment in blood, payment in pain.

Villain's Minions carried Death Noodle across the sky toward Villain's secret lair, thinking him captive, and Death Noodle couldn't help but thank them, silently. There was no other place he wanted to be more than in front of the Villain who had murdered his friends, in that moment. He began to pray they'd carry him faster to their master's doom. While he waited out the journey, Death Noodle pondered all the ways he'd seen his father express aspects of death into being, considering all the ways he might make Villain suffer for his crimes.

When the Minions began their descent toward Villain's

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hidden lair, Death Noodle's head was full of grisly images of Villain's many bloody tortures at his hands.

As he was carried inside and through the labyrinth of sterile gray institutional corridors, Death Noodle prayed for peace and self control, that God might help him seek justice rather than vengeance, but his heart was still full of anger.

The moment Villain's face came into view at their final destination, Death Noodle found himself doubting himself again—not doubting his capabilities, but doubting he could use his powers to circumvent doing what was right, just to exact revenge for his own pain and losses.

“Fix it!” Screamed Villain at Death Noodle as soon as the Minions had brought them face to face. “I rightfully stole it. You had no right to break it.”

“You had no right to steal it, and no right to murder my friends,” replied Death Noodle. “You have no right to shut down the Internet, even if you do disagree with how some of us make use of it.”

“I have every right!” insisted Villain. He began searching his pockets, then digging through the piles of junk and electronics scattered around the lab, saying, “I’ve got my badge around here, somewhere. It gives me all the authority I need.”

“I’ve been through quite a few meetings with the US government and the UN on related subjects, and I can say with all assurance that there’s no such thing as a license to kill, Villain. You’ve gone too far.” Death Noodle could feel his anger just below the surface. He could see Villain’s suit begin to wrinkle, its color begin to fade, and he forced himself to turn his gaze away before taking too many years off the senator’s life. Death Noodle took the opportunity to

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survey the makeshift laboratory Villain was using.

The place was a mess. Every horizontal surface was stacked haphazardly with a menagerie of marginalia; paper-work and plans, broken and incomplete electronics, tools and weapons and containers of half-eaten takeout. Death Noodle could somehow sense which electronic components were functioning, what the computers were doing, and sense the speed and efficiency of the local network. He could see the central area, where Robot's stolen—and subsequently deactivated—component had been connected to Villain's sinister collection of computers, now sitting idle. It was clear that someone had thrown a tantrum in the area recently, tearing some things to pieces and tossing other things around the room. Death Noodle knew that Villain hadn't been having much luck with getting the stolen component to bend to his will in the days since he'd taken it, but suspected this obvious breakdown had occurred subsequently to the virtual Robot's deactivating its Internet connection altogether.

Villain thought he might get better results with better threats, and asked his Minions, "Where's the other one? The fairy. She should have been with them."

"No boss," one of the Minions replied, "it was just these two and the old man. You killed the fairy at the concert, boss." The Minion indicated Robot's crumpled form on the floor where the others had dropped him, adding, "And this one's still dead. They must not have been able to repair him."

"I saw them with my own eyes!" shouted Villain at his Minion. "They cut into my video conference with Band Manager, and all three of them were alive. She must have been hiding somewhere. She probably followed you here!"

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Villain got right up into the Minion's face, still shouting, and began jamming his finger into the Minion's shoulder as he ordered, "Get out there and find her! No mistakes this time! We can't have her alerting the authorities to our location before we get this thing back online!"

Death Noodle didn't mind letting Villain send his Minions on a wild goose chase, so choked down the urge to repeat the charge of murder. Instead he said, "You'll never find her," as though she might actually be out there somewhere to be found, rather than dust in the wind and a fading memory in his mind.

The Minion who had spoken walked back out of the room, and several other Minions followed, heading out into the night to look for someone who wasn't there. "Don't underestimate the forces I've assembled here, Noodle. I don't care if you have dressed up to look more like your father. You don't scare me. You're a musician. You're on my side, even if you won't admit it."

"I'll never be on the side of murder, Villain. Even if I did believe that copyright protection required as extreme a form of enforcement as you're trying to force on the world, I still wouldn't want anyone to die for it. No IP is worth a life."

"Plenty of religious fanatics would disagree with you," Villain pointed out. He walked over to Robot's lifeless body and kicked it, shouting, "Get up! I know you're faking! I saw you hacking into my systems, and I know you can get this thing back online!"

Robot's body did nothing but stub Villain's toe. Death Noodle tried to ignore the offense. Villain cursed loudly and limped right up into Death Noodle's face before he began

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shouting again.

"I'm not kidding around here, Noodle. If you're going to insist that your friends really are dead, then you know I won't hesitate to take a life if it gets in the way of my success, yours included. Tell me what you did to deactivate the device, and show me how to fix it, or I'll murder you, too," threatened Villain. After half a beat, he added, "But I'll do it slowly. You'll tell me what I want to know, and you'll wish you'd told me sooner. Then I'll finally stop Internet piracy, and your next-of-kin's interest in your copyrights will be protected."

"You don't understand copyright at all," said Death Noodle, "or progress, or how culture grows and advances from one stage to the next. Copyright law as it stands already is too powerful and too far-reaching, and you're proposing that a program of universal censorship be enacted in the name of copyright. If such a program were allowed to exist, it would kill progress and creation as we know it. The only culture left would be unlawful, underground culture, because nothing else would be allowed."

"That's ridiculous. Don't pretend that if I let you live you'd stop making new music. You artist types keep creating, no matter what. You do it without pay, you do it without an audience, why would you stop creating because I'm creating a system that will finally protect you from having your creations stolen?"

"Because according to your rules, everything is stolen," explained Death Noodle. As they were arguing, he could somehow sense that Robot's body had silently begun coming back online, but he made no move to let that fact slip. He hoped Robot's consciousness would be intact, and that

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he wouldn't crash again as soon as he was online, but Death Noodle didn't know whether he had any basis for that hope. He continued, "In reality, everything is a remix. Re-use is everywhere. There is nothing truly new in modern creation; everything is influenced by what came before it. Some of the best new ideas are simply combinations of old ideas. Reese's Peanut Butter cups are a remix of chocolate and peanut butter, and peanut butter is a derivative of peanuts. I'm a remix of my father, Death, and my mother, who was a beautiful, caring noodle. If copying, repurposing, reuse, and remixing of the old into the new were prohibited, I couldn't exist."

"All the more reason to kill you," was Villain's response. "You're like a walking violation of your father's Intellectual Property and in this ridiculous getup you're reproducing his likeness without permission, too. Once I get the Internet cleaned up, I'll find a way to put a stop to people like you. Have no doubt about that."

Robot's reboot was going much faster than it had last time, and in the expected order, so that Death Noodle could sense that he was fully conscious within just a few seconds. He hoped his friend would stand up and help him bring Villain to justice, but while he waited in nervous anticipation, Death Noodle said, "Will you stop yourself, too? Everything you've done here is the sort of theft, remixing, repurposing, and invention-by-adaptation that your narrow view of copyright would prevent. Even the software you've been using to try to wipe out copyright violations online is itself remixed from stolen programs. Why do you presume to be an exception to your own ridiculous rules? Couldn't you come up with a wholly original idea, a completely new way to accomplish your goals?"

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"I didn't have to; most of the work was done for me!"

"Exactly," said Robot, almost instantly on his feet. "We all build on the work of those who come before us." Robot paused to do something Death Noodle had never witnessed before; he began coughing. Hacking and coughing, as though he had a deep bronchial infection, though he did not in fact have bronchioles at all. In between wheezing and coughing, Robot quipped, "Pardon me, but I seem to have had an overheating issue earlier, due to some particulate matter in my ventilation system." He coughed, "If you'll just give me a moment to clear it out," he doubled over and wheezed out a long, rough breath, forcing a small cloud of what appeared to be glitter from all the ventilation ports on his upper body. The glitter sparkled, hovering rather than settling, and then began to take shape.

"I knew it!" shouted Villain, pointing at Robot and the slowly-coalescing form within the cloud of glitter he'd just coughed up. "I knew you two were still alive!"

"That's news to me," said Death Noodle, and he almost couldn't believe his eyes. His heart skipped a beat when he saw Glitterfairy's face take shape from the thickening, glowing, sparking cloud of sparkles.

"Now fix it!" insisted Villain, pointing an ordinary gun at Robot and the index finger of his other hand at the stolen component. "Don't you realize how much money the pirates are stealing from you, this very minute? We've got to stop them!"

"Sorry, Villain," said Robot. "It may not make sense to you, but neither of us would be alive right now, if not for unauthorized access to our Intellectual Property and unauthorized copying. I'm going to go out on a limb and

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say that, if not for the fact that you murdered them, the original versions of us would have considered using copies of them to bring us back to life a pretty fair use.” Robot knew they weren’t technically copies, but he’d read enough of the senator’s proposed legislation to know that he would have considered the simple acts of transferring their minds from one body to another and back again at least four different copying violations. He continued, “The authorities are on their way. Your reign of terror is over. Glitterfairy, if you wouldn’t mind restraining Villain and his remaining Minions, I’ll get to work restoring the parts of the Internet his systems were able to wipe out.”

Glitterfairy had them wrapped up in a restraining rainbow in no time. Death Noodle was still trying to get used to seeing her brought back from the dead for the third time that day, and didn’t trust that it would last. He asked Robot, “How did you...?” and he asked Glitterfairy, “How are you...?” and he stood there, unable to finish his questions, waiting for an answer.

“God always has a plan,” was the only answer he got.

Chapter Eighteen

While Robot began working to reverse-engineer what Villain had done, Death Noodle and Glitterfairy began working their way systematically through the lair, rounding up all the Minions who didn't yet know their side had lost. Villain's real-world Minions were even less of a threat than his virtual ones had been, especially once they saw Glitterfairy back from the dead and Death Noodle looking so much like his father. Within about half an hour, they'd rounded up and restrained all the Minions on-site, and verified with Villain's detailed record-keeping system that all but six of them were accounted for—the half-dozen who had gone out to try to locate Glitterfairy. Death Noodle sent the highest-ranked Minion among them a text message from Villain's captured smartphone, and the last of them were in DNGR's custody before the first of the UN's task force began to show up.

Once securing the facility had been taken care of, Death Noodle and Glitterfairy returned, hand in hand, to the laboratory where Robot was still working on trying to undo the damage Villain had done to the Internet. When Robot saw them come in, he said, "I'm glad you're back, Death Noodle. Would you mind helping me in there?"

"What can I do?"

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"If you'll track down and delete the last of the virtual Minions still running wild, it'll make it a lot easier for me to finish the work of restoring the data to the damaged systems."

"How can you restore the data?"

"Oh, the Minions weren't destroying anything, merely sequestering it. Until we switched this off," he said, lifting his half-dissected component from the table, "not a single bit or byte of data was lost. The out-of-control Minions weren't nearly as diligent, but I've been able to restore about eighty percent of affected systems, so far."

"But with the Minions still in there, wreaking havoc, you can't keep up." Death Noodle shrugged. "And you think I can help?"

"With what you've just been through, I think there are a lot of things you'll be able to accomplish now that you wouldn't have been capable of before. For example, try closing your eyes and visualizing the local wireless network."

Death Noodle closed his eyes and, without having to put any conscious effort into it, found himself back in the immersive simulated interpretation of the digital world he'd recently traversed to save his best friends. He saw, and felt, himself standing in the heart of Villain's ruined virtual lair. With a start, Death Noodle opened his eyes, glad to see he was still there in the lab, not trapped in the virtual space. "How is that possible?"

"If I were to guess, I'd say it was probably something to do with your mind restructuring itself to accommodate the full powers of an avatar of Death while fully immersed in a digital environment, which you were connected to over a high-bandwidth electronic connection compatible with your

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existing mental capabilities—and in the process the ability to natively connect to digital systems and experience them as fully virtualized multidimensional simulations was added to things like being able to reverse death, control armies of the dead, and judge the righteous and the damned. It's just part of your new toolset."

Death Noodle shook his head and asked, "How did you know?"

"You keep pinging me," Robot said, and laughed.

Death Noodle turned to Glitterfairy, gave her a little kiss, and said, "Let us know when the UN guys get here." She nodded, he found a safe place to sit, then closed his eyes and joined Robot in cleaning up the Internet.

After that, their morning gave DNGR few surprises. The UN showed up too late to help, and insisted on an unbelievable amount of paperwork to document what had happened. In the official report, they suggested that the same device which had appeared to kill Glitterfairy had somehow preserved her within Robot's body, which was why his systems had initialized out of order, trying to work around her magical presence. Of course, none of them really knew any such thing, but the UN required answers and welcomed speculation. It reduced the charges from murder to attempted murder, but the other crimes Villain had committed along the way added up to quite a heavy toll. By mid-afternoon they were allowed to return to their mansion, making a quick stop by Tinkerer's shop to let him know they'd all been saved by his help once again. Robot went to his lab to examine and catalogue all the alien technology he'd confiscated from Villain's lair. Glitterfairy and Death Noodle simply collapsed into his giant, soft bed together, not bothering to change

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into pajamas before falling into a deep sleep in one another's arms.

The next day, DNGR was relieved of having to fire Band Manager in person; he was arrested on charges of aiding and abetting Villain. They faxed his office the necessary paperwork to dissolve their relationship, and decided to take Robot up on his offer of taking over for them. He quickly arranged and posted an updated tour schedule, and tickets began to sell out for the third time in as many weeks. Their first gig was that night at the amphitheater where Villain had first revealed his treachery and where DNGR's friends and fans had been keeping a continuous vigil for nearly a week. They were welcomed as heroes, and preceded on stage by a representative from the UN before they could play their first song. He began, "DNGR has had a profound impact on all our lives, and on the lives of people all over the world. Not a single member nation of the UN can say they haven't seen things get better for them because of you three, between the cultural impact of your music and the way you keep saving us from maniacs like Villain."

The audience cheered for DNGR, and booed for Villain, and the UN representative continued, "With an unprecedented degree of efficiency and velocity, in response to the dire situation you've been going through over the last week and the sacrifices you were willing to make to protect the cultural and creative freedom of the world, the UN has created and ratified a treaty to prevent anything like this from happening again. Congress and the Senate held a special session today, and with the President's signature an hour ago, the US has joined eighty-five other nations who have already signed on to this treaty. I won't bore you with

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the details, which I encourage you all to go online and read for yourselves, but this treaty guarantees protections for fair use, re-use, and re-mixing of intellectual property for non-commercial purposes, establishes global guidelines for negotiating terms regarding commercial exploitation of derivative works, and states clearly the belief of UN member nations that all culture is built on existing culture, and that sharing and building on existing culture is the only way forward for any of us. We believe this document will go a long way toward encouraging the continued growth of a vibrant international culture, while balancing creators' economic interests against the greater good of the public domain."

The crowd went wild. They hadn't understood all that he'd said, and he'd explained a tiny fraction of what the treaty aimed to do, but they were sure it was something good. Something that would prevent people like Villain from trying to destroy the Internet in the name of corporate moneymaking. They cheered, hooted, hollered, and clapped until the UN representative left the stage. Then Death Noodle and Glitterfairy came on stage hand in hand, and Robot rocketed into place at his drum set on one of Villain's jetpacks, and they really went wild. Death Noodle and Glitterfairy kissed before parting ways to take up their respective positions on stage, and at least ten percent of the audience fainted at confirmation of the rumors that they'd finally gotten together.

Then Robot began banging out a new beat on the drums, Glitterfairy's hands began playing a new melody on her keyboards, and Death Noodle began strumming out a new chord progression on his guitar, and the audience fell nearly to silence as they waited to hear something they'd never heard before. Death Noodle took his microphone in

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hand, Glitterfairy leaned toward hers, and they sang a duet about secret love. About keeping love a secret, out of fear or friendship, and the cost of the loss of all that time and all that love. They sang about how love grows when nurtured, and how it can wither and fade if you hide it away. Death Noodle and Glitterfairy were far from the only ones moved to tears by their anthem, a song unlike anything they'd ever sung, and their audience of devoted fans was divided between weeping, hugging, and cheering by the time they were through.

Epilogue

In Robot's own laboratory, where he'd left all the alien technology he'd recovered from Villain's lair, something unusual began to occur while DNGR was away at the concert that night. The partially-reprogrammed, physically modified and incomplete component Villain had stolen from Robot's own chest began trying to repair itself. It still possessed the systems and information for rebuilding any part of Robot from scratch and, in its damaged state, seemed to have decided it was all that remained of Robot—it began growing a body of its own.

Unfortunately, it had been corrupted by Villain, inside and out. The version of Robot which formed around it was more Villain than Robot, more power-hungry and self-serving than altruistic and concerned with justice and balance. Its body did not have the smooth, symmetrical shape and shine of Robot's; it more closely resembled the rough, mutant forms of Villain's avatar, with odd bulbous growths and clusters of tiny tentacles like infections seeping across its metallic skin. Its software was just as corrupt, and it was good fortune that while Death Noodle had gained the ability to connect to the Internet, this Villain-Robot's networking capabilities were permanently disabled. Given the chance, it

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would have done more damage to the Internet within minutes than Villain had dreamed of accomplishing in years.

Well before DNGR had finished their first set, the Villain-Robot was as fully-formed as it was going to become, and was headed out the front door of their mansion with dark intent in its eyes. Eventually, Robot noticed that the component was not where he'd thought he left it, but by the time he learned what had become of it, Villain-Robot's plans had already been set in motion.

Be sure to visit

<http://modernevil.com/DNGR/>



About the Author

Teel is an independent author, artist, creative visionary, blogger, publisher, podcaster, and sometimes a composer, a filmmaker, and a programmer, too.

Teel is happily married to an English teacher and they live together in Phoenix, AZ with a grumpy old cat, a skittish young cat, and thousands of books, both read and to-be-read. *Virtual Danger* is Teel's nineteenth book, and there are plenty more trying to work their way into this world through the aperture of Teel's imagination, hoping to be found and loved by readers like you. Interestingly, none of the others are books in **The Death Noodle Glitterfairy Robot Saga**—yet.

You can find out more about him and his other stories, novels, poetry and more by visiting Modern Evil Press:

<http://modernevil.com/>

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