

LONELY STREET CUT OFF

Oly hustled down the corridor, chewing on the sub sandwich that was his supper. It sat like a lead brick in his stomach but it was all he would have a chance to eat until after tonight's run. He was already fifteen minutes late, thanks to Dr. Rumson. As a graduate assistant, Oly was supposed to assist whatever professor requested his aid. At four o'clock Rumson had asked Oly to grade the test papers from one of his classes. They were supposed to be returned at the next class period, which just happened to be at 7:30 that evening. It was a good thing it was a small class.

Oly grinned as he paused at the security door of the lab and waited for the system to ID and clear him. The grades were probably higher than what Rumson would have given. Especially on a test that was thirty per cent of the final grade.

The light over the door flashed green and the door slid back into the wall. Oly froze.

The inside of the lab was a madhouse. Assistants were at every couch, helping the 'rats', as the volunteers were referred to, as they came out of fugue. Two of the loungers had a cluster of people around them. As Oly stepped into the room he heard Dr. Kissler call for the shock cart. He crossed the room, dreading what he knew he was going to find.

He looked over Kissler's shoulder at the supine form of his brother. The monitors were all reading as close to flat line as they could get. He stared in disbelief at a pulse rate of 8 per minute with only a hint of brain activity. Oly stepped to the operator console. He laid a beefy hand on the man's shoulder and spun him, chair and all,

into the far wall. Kissler and crew turned at the commotion and the security types at the door started towards Oly. Kissler recognized the younger Kiedrowski and waved them back. Oly ignored everything as his fingers flew over the keyboard.

Data on the run began to scroll past at a phenomenal rate. The run had gone by the numbers for two complete passes. Then on the third pass there was a massive spike in brain activity followed by erratic readings on the body function lines, then nothing. Oly requested correlation to all previous runs. As he waited, cursing slow circuitry, he heard the shock cart arrive.

“Not yet!” He bellowed over his shoulder as data started to flow. The man on unit 7 had experienced the same activity 3 milliseconds before Stosh. And the only other record that matched was the time he and Stosh had been trapped in the referent files. Oly checked his brother’s stats again and those on Unit 7. A quick overlay showed less than a .02% variance.

1 He turned to where Dr. Kissler stood by his brother with the shock pads ready in his hands.

2 “They’re inside.”

3 Kissler stared in disbelief.

4 “That’s impossible. You wrote the safeguards yourself.”

5 Oly acknowledged with a curt nod.

6 “I know. Mike and I locked those files. Tight.”

“So what do we do?” Kissler asked as he lowered the shock pads.

“Keep them on monitor and wait.”

Before the words had left his mouth, the vital sign monitor began to sound. Oly checked the board. It was the guy on Unit 7. He had gone flat. They quickly moved the cart over to the lounge and ripped the shirt off the man. One of the EMT-trained assistants ripped the helmet from the man's head and put the respirator over the slack mouth while Kissler slapped the shock pads in place.

"Clear!"

The body jumped as volts coursed through the chest. The monitor registered the pulse, then returned to flat. Kissler yelled and hit him again. No response. He accepted the syringe one of the techs had supplied and injected the adrenaline directly into the heart while another technician applied chest massage. They ran through the full routine but the monitor never wavered from its ominous monotone.

Finally, Dr. Kissler stepped back.

"Damn. Damn. Call it. I read..."he looked to the display on the monitor,...."time of death as 7:56. Cause of death, massive system failure. Damn."

Kissler turned to Oly, his eyes haunted. It was the first death that could be directly linked to the machine. Kissler looked down at Mike.

7 Oly shook his head.

8 "No change."

9 "What do we do now?"

10 "Wait."

I slid my pick up over into the exit lane and headed down the off ramp. A left, two blocks on Blanding and another left put me in the Electric Cowboys' parking lot. Inside the place was dark, quiet and cool. There were a few of the regulars sitting at their usual spots as I slid onto my stool. Papa brought me a frosty mug of beer.

"You're early, Mike."

"I got relieved early. Dykes owed me one." I took a long drink of the first of my three beers. It slid down nice and easy after 24 hours of boring duty as duty Master-at Arms for a Navy base that needed a Master-at-Arms like it needed a battleship. Just a landlocked air test base, little brother to the big air station at Cecil Field. But it was nice quiet, easy duty for my last tour before retirement.

"Hey, Mike."

I turned towards the voice. Two stools down, Jim Doolittle sat at his usual spot. He raised his mug to me.

"Did you hear about the storm they spotted down east of Puerto Rico?"

"It was just coming over the wire when I checked out. It didn't read like much."

Jimmy gave me a knowing grin.

"I wouldn't be so sure. These early whirly girls can get pretty wicked."

"Not my department. Anything the Navy thinks I should know, they'll tell me."

Jimmy shook his head as Papa brought me a fresh beer. As I took it, I could see he had something he wanted to add. I looked around the bar. Every one was watching me. Suddenly my stomach began to ache.

“What is it?”

Papa watched out of those dark eyes of his, shelved under bushy eyebrows.

“You best be heading home, Mike.”

I looked down at my beer, sitting untouched on the mahogany. Without a word I headed for my truck. Ten minutes later I pulled into my driveway and killed the engine. My two boys, Roland and Oliver, were playing in the backyard. They hadn’t heard me pull up so I watched as they scrambled over the jungle gym I had built for them. The sky grew darker as clouds rolled in from the southeast. The boys looked up from their play as the shadow slipped over the yard. A cold shudder passed through me, coming right out of nowhere.

The boys’ attention was drawn to the back of the house and I followed it. Ally, my wife, came walking towards them from the deck area. The ache in my middle deepened as I watched her willow slim form head across the grass towards the boys. Eighteen years of marriage had done nothing to harm her. Eighteen years of happiness. Suddenly the pain in me was like a cold fire wanting out.

It seemed to come out of nowhere. One moment the sky was darkening, the next it coalesced into a hideous form just over the fence in the neighbor’s yard. Without thinking I was out of the truck, pulling my battle-ax from the box. I yelled at Ally and the kids but they couldn’t hear me. The thing had finished taking shape, a huge

ogre like monstrosity with a wide flaccid lipped mouth. Slime drooled in an almost steady stream from the tusks that hung down into grooves worn in the undershot jaw.

I was running in slow motion as it vaulted the fence and closed on my family. I watched in frustrated horror as they noticed it moments before it fell on them. Their screams carried to me as they were torn to pieces. I tried to run harder but a giant hand held me back. I screamed and cried like a madman but I couldn't close the distance. When it finished, the creature looked directly at me, its lambent eyes glowing in satisfaction. I wiped the tears from my eyes and got down from my truck.

Rolly and Olly came pelting out of the backyard, yelling like the hellions they were. I sat down on the running board, my legs no longer able to support me. The pain across my middle was a steady throb as I felt a warm hand touch my cheek. I looked up into Ally's concerned eyes.

"A bad one?"

I could only nod weakly before I leaned into her leg and cried quietly.

Oly reread the file on the screen in front of him. Beside him, his brother's monitor continued to log a heart beat every 8 seconds and his brainwaves rippled like a lake under a gentle breeze. Fifteen minutes had passed since the man on Unit 7, a Kenneth Tuchman, had died. Tuchman's file was of no real help. He had passed the physical given all volunteers as well as the psych profile. He had been age 42, male, Caucasian. Widower schoolteacher from Pineville, North Carolina. His wife had died in an accident almost

two years earlier and Tuchman had come to the Prometheus Project only a month ago. This had been his first run. His bio read as bland as oatmeal with all the usual crap that an average person collected over the years. There was absolutely nothing out of the ordinary.

Oly was about to slam the keyboard in frustration when he stopped, hand in mid swing.

Ordinary. Absolutely ordinary. He froze the biofile and split to a comm program. In seconds he was in the master Social Security files. He scanned in a Search routine for Tuchman's SSI. It came up issued May 7, 1951. Age 2 days. Oly's eyes narrowed. He keyed a second search as he tried to quell the roiling in his gut. Nothing.

He backed out of the SSI files and set the computer on an area search of North Carolina for the name of Tuchman, Kenneth A. and came up with local records that read almost identical to Tuchman's biofile. Then he re-entered the SSI files. Tuchman's number had been issued in Michigan so he backed out again and did a global on the number for the district in which the SSI had been issued. He waited impatiently as the computer dug through thousands of files and finally came up with a single response.

11 Death certificate issued, May 12, 1951.

12 Tuchman wasn't real.

He punched in the intercom extension for the medical lab where they had taken the body for autopsy and got Kissler on the screen.

"Doc, have you taken Tuchman's DNA print yet?"

“Just finished. I was going to put it in the file when we finish here. Why?”

“Download it now. I may have something.”

Kissler’s eyes lowered as he entered data on his keyboard. He looked over and told some one off screen to link the DNA reader into the system.

“What do you have?”

“Tuchman’s a spook. And a damn good one. There’s an over ride on the global search for his SSI in the master storage files that keys a simple search into what’s got to be a canned insert. I did a local search on the issue district and came up with a DC dated 5 days after issue. Either our schoolteacher had some heavy computer programming background or the bucks to buy it done. Neither shows in his file. I’m hoping he has a DNA master with the FBI. I don’t think anyone can kludge their system.”

“All right. See what you can find. I’ve initiated the official autopsy findings into the perms. Good luck, Pat.”

The boys were down for the night. Ally and I sat across from each other at the kitchen table. The boys had been quiet after they had seen how lousy I felt. They were too young to have any real feel for what was happening to me but they were solicitous in their own boyish way. Ally watched me, her big gray eyes soft with concern. The doctors could find nothing wrong with me. I was in fine shape with no monsters in the closet of my past yet I still had the visions. Horrible visions of death and destruction. Always of my family and always their deaths in grisly detail.

The phone rang breaking the tableau. It was my brother. He wanted to see me down at the Port-o-Call. It was a little pub just down the road. I held Ally close and kissed her gently before I left.

“His name was Bertram Jackman. He was one of the original team at Rochester International that worked on their version of the Dream Machine before they lost their funding.”

Kissler sat staring into space above his head.

“There was something about losing some of their volunteers. I remember it didn’t get much play in the papers. The Pentagon wanted the research to go on so they closed down Rochester and shifted the operation to us. But Pat, do you think this was sabotage?”

Oly shook his head.

“Not in the normal sense. Jackman was pretty much blackballed after the shutdown. He dropped out of the VR development because he was in charge of the program when it went bad. No one would touch him. He disappeared. The only thing that comes out of any search is his wife’s death about two years ago.”

Kissler started. “You mean that much was real?”

“Not only real but the key to this. His wife died under mysterious circumstances. A pill suicide with no prelude whatsoever. Jackman said she had been despondent since he was fired but no one could confirm it. They had to go with the suicide ruling but it was questionable.”

“Why is it so important?”

“Her name was Alice Milligan. Mike knew her in high school. I was just a kid but I checked with our folks. Every one was surprised when Mike went off and joined the Navy, evidently after a fight with Alice. The general opinion is that they fought and he went off in a huff. When he got back, Alice had moved on and married Jackman.”

“And you think...”

“That Jackman knew his wife had married him out of spite. I’m pretty sure Mike and Alice never had any contact but it doesn’t mean Jackman didn’t see him as a rival, both professionally and personally. Rumor had it that their marriage was one in name only. Maybe Mike was the reason.”

Kissler looked at Mike’s monitor. Over an hour in the machine. It could be a lifetime, several lifetimes. Too long to be trapped with a maniac.

For some reason I could never decipher, the Port-o-Call looked different every time I stopped in. Tonight, it looked like a cross between an old English pub and the Parthenon. I parked my truck in the empty lot and headed for the door. I stopped to scratch behind three sets of ears belonging to the watchdog that lay across the stoop and went inside.

Pat was nowhere in sight. There were about a dozen people in the joint but no one was at the bar so I took a stool and waved the bar keep over. He was a portly white haired gent in USC sweats. He brought me a beer and stayed, seeming to want to listen.

“I’m waiting for my brother. Pat Kiedrowski. Big fella with a cigar?”

13 The bar keep shook his head.

14 “He can’t make it.”

15 “You know him?”

16 “...of him.” He answered as he wiped the bar next to me.

I looked around at the crowd, not liking the way that sounded. There was a big guy with a red gold beard and plate armor sitting with a slim woman with wet skin that shimmered and smelled of the sea. At the back table a red head in Assyrian garb arm wrestled with a one handed man in a gold and green tunic while another man in a slouch hat refereed. As I watched a couple rose from their table and headed my way. The woman was a statuesque blonde of incredible beauty dressed in archaic clothing I couldn’t place. It did match that of the rumpled man with the big nose who stayed at their table. The man with her wasn’t large, medium sized and medium everything. Except for the unruly mop of dark curly hair and the dark intense eyes. He offered his hand as he approached.

“Mr. Kiedrowski. A pleasure to finally meet you.”

“I’m afraid I can’t place you, sir. Have we met?”

“Many times.” He smiled and took the wire rim glasses from his nose and absently wiped them on his lab coat. “My name is Zarkoff, Hans Zarkoff.”

“That’s impossible.”

“Come now, Mr. Kiedrowski. Or may I call you Stosh?”

“Call me any damn thing you want.”

The guy gave me a sad look and shook his head. The blondes face tightened angrily and her sapphire eyes snapped.

Maybe I was being too touchy but my gut ached and one of my killer headaches was starting. I didn't need to deal with some fruit that thought he was a fictional genius and I said as much. For a second I thought the blonde was going to smack me.

"Gently, Star. Mr. Kiedrowski has been through quite a bit. It is why he is here."

"I'm here to talk to my brother. Period."

"Ah, yes. But about what, sir, that is the topic we wish to bring forth. You see, we made the call that brought you here. Here, you are safe."

"Safe? What do you mean? I'm not in any danger."

"No?" The blonde he called Star asked with a disdainfully raised eyebrow. "Do you think your...daymares?...are quite normal? Or the pain you are feeling even now? I would think those are things you want dealt with."

I was off my stool before she finished. Part of me registered the fact that Bignose was out of his chair and that a big bruiser with a scarred face had seemed to materialize beside Star but all I wanted were answers.

"If you're behind these damned visions, I'll see you dead."

Zarkoff worked his way between us and gently pushed me back.

"No, Mr. Kiedrowski, we are not behind this horror. But we are in a position to help you. Please, calm yourself."

"Up yours, buddy." I said flatly. Suddenly, I had to sit down. The pain in my stomach was subsiding as was the headache,

leaving me weak. The bartender pushed a fresh mug of brew across the bar. Something was definitely out of whack but I couldn't place what it was. I scanned the faces of every one in the bar. It wasn't too hard, they were all staring at me. Every one of them was familiar. Hauntingly so. I looked at Zarkoff.

17 "What the hell is going on?"

18 "A meeting of the minds?"

19 "Who's?"

"Yours, mostly. And Patrick's. With hints of scores of others."

It was there. As if a mist was being burned off by the sun. It was still hard to see clearly but I was beginning to get a better idea of what was happening.

"Prometheus."

Zarkoff nodded, his ugly face lighting with a grin as he addressed the room in general.

20 "As I told you."

21 "I'm inside again. Or am I?"

22 "Most definitely, Mr. Kiedrowski."

"But how? Oly and I locked all the referent files up so tight we can't even get into them."

Zarkoff smiled.

"And a fine job of it, too. I could hardly have done better myself."

23 "I'm in the program."

24 "No."

25 "Then where?"

It hit me. I had gone over the edge. It was the only thing I could think of that explained how I was sitting in a tavern, conversing with a file. A collection of 0 and 1's that looked and acted like a person. But even as I thought it, I knew it wasn't true. This wasn't the product of a diseased and disordered imagination. How I knew, I couldn't begin to say, I just knew it.

"You really are Hans Zarkoff. And the rest..."

"Are exactly who they appear to be? Quite right."

"I am in the machine. Somewhere other than the referent files?"

The man in the dark cloak and slouch hat stepped forward and fixed his eye on me. I shivered in spite of myself. It was not a pleasant eye.

"Ye know not what ye have wrought, man, but ye have done it exceedingly well."

"This is impossible. You're all figments of imagination."

"After a fashion. Tis how we were born, not how we exist."

"Do you?"

"After a fashion even we haven't fully come to comprehend."

"This can't be. I've lived my entire life..." inside, I thought. But no. There were vague memories of Prometheus, of the massive VR machine my brother and I had helped to build. The pain behind my eyes was blinding me as I remembered going to college. Getting my degree, after I had left the Navy. But I was still in the Navy. I closed my eyes and massaged my temples as I tried to think around the pain. When I looked up, Allie was there. Beautiful Allie of the gray

eyes. My wife, mother of my phantom sons, dead now for over two....no, the pain blasted at the thought and I doubled over, falling off the stool in agony.

“Dammit, Bill, I have to go in. He’s in there and alive.”

Kissler watched the younger Kiedrowski stalk across the room in anger. He empathized with the big man. Stosh wasn’t his brother but it was close. That difference allowed him to sit back a little and think logically where Pat only wanted to act.

“Oly, you wouldn’t have the slightest idea of where to begin to look. All of your search programs have come back null and the diagnostics just aren’t coming up with any glitches in the operating system. If you went in, hell man we have no idea of what you would find. Or if you would find anything.” He waved a hand at the printouts of probabilities the pair had run on what had happened and what could happen. All of them were ridiculously low in the success column.

“If he is alive and conscious, he will have to find a way of communicating with us. Until then Pat, all we can do is wait.”

As the haze cleared from my thoughts, I pieced together the tattered and scattered bits of me. I lay on what felt like a plank floor, my midsection throbbing with a low-grade ache. Beneath my head was a soft thigh. It was reassuring, but it scared the hell out of me. I had no idea of who or what I would see if I opened my eyes so I didn’t. I just collected my thoughts and memories. That was confusing enough. There were two distinct sets, each overlaying the other like some kind of bizarre template with features from each blurring into the other. Both tasted of total reality, yet the one

dictated the other had to be fantasy. Now that the pain was gone, I could reluctantly select where my reality lay.

I opened my eyes.

Her face was a soft memory, the concern in her eyes an image of the love of this life. The life I would have liked, daymares and all. But it was all in my mind, the ultimate head game. I smiled sadly and reached up to stroke her cheek, fully expecting her to vanish like some vapor wraith at any moment. Instead my hand came away wet from her tears and my heart torn by the anguish in those eyes as she realized I was rejecting our pseudo-life together.

I stood up, mostly to get out from under that sorrowed weight and faced the gathered entities. Reluctantly I closed my eyes, and with a massive load of regret I knew I would never get out from under, I mentally pulled the switch that would send me back to the emptiness of the real world.

Nothing.

I pulled again, panic overriding all feelings, running through the recall codes Oly and I had installed as an emergency backup. It should have been the same as typing them into the master keyboard. It should have pulled my consciousness back into my body. All I got was a null program message. Followed by an echo of a laugh.

“Oly!” Kissler called from the terminal where he had been rerunning the system diagnostics for the fortieth time. His fingers flew over the keyboard as he tried to recall the message that had briefly flashed on the screen. Pat was at his shoulder.

“He’s alive! There was a interrupt message, if I can find the damn thing.” Kissler frantically searched for a log of the message but nothing was forth coming. Pat shouldered him aside and began to type in code that Kissler didn’t recognize. Suddenly, an unfamiliar string of text scrolled onto the screen. Pat muttered a quiet damn.

“What is that?”

Pat stared at the screen a moment, lost in his head.

“What? Oh, it’s an emergency return string I wrote. It bypasses all other egress and is written directly into the central codex. It should abort all subprograms and running routines. But nothing is running so it’s a null input.”

26 “Mike?”

27 Oly nodded.

“I’ve got to get to the master console. You stay here and keep an eye on Mike. I’ll key in a direct comm link and keep you posted.”

“OK, Dr. Zarkoff, you seem to have something to tell me about all this. Let’s hear it. Starting with where this tavern is and why I can’t get back.”

Zarkoff gave me a commiserating smile and began to clean his glasses on his lab coat.

28 “The first is not easy.”

29 “Why?”

“Because there is limited language with which to describe the phenomena. Also, I don’t really know.”

“Try real hard.”

The others bristled at the ominous tone in my voice but I really didn't give a tinkers damn. Some shadowed instinct told me I had to get some answers and soon.

"You are in a reality that has been generated by the Prometheus machine. It is in the memory of the machine yet it is not. I would suppose that it is rooted in the programs and physical memory storage areas but it extends far beyond. It is something of a tesseract effect."

"How far does this tesseract effect reach?"

Zarkoff shrugged.

"Infinity? And beyond? You see, every time we think we have reached a border, the reality of the border area suggests something more and..."

I sat down on my stool, stunned at the implications. A self-generating program. We had spent over a decade feeding in data, parameters of every environment known to man and to his imagination. I knew the amount of physical memory capacity we had built beneath the Prometheus complex and while it was phenomenal, it was finite. At last check we had a bit over 70% filled. If what Zarkoff was saying was true, the machine would fill that in a matter of microseconds with a self-perpetuating system. And there was no unaccounted for use of the system memory. Oly and I had written the antiviral programs to prevent just such a thing from happening. So where was this information being stored?

"What about you people? You are fictional and historical characters stored in bit files. According to what I'm thinking there

could be infinite analogs of each of you habituating various stories that were loaded into the referent files. Is that right?”

“I’ll answer this one, Dr. Zarkoff.”

The new speaker was the one handed man in green and gold.

“You blocked that, Dr. Kiedrowski. When you locked away the referents and made the active gaming area, you forced the computer to regenerate each of us according to the template. We can draw information from the locked files, much as you draw from memory, but each of us is a unique entity here. We must needs interact with one and other according to the personality which was given.”

I nodded, feeling a bit odd at having a god, even a dead one, calling me by an honorific.

“And the gaming program, it runs all the time. We did that to increase the interaction of the base personality profiles. But how is it that I can interact with you? I am not a computer generated profile with a coded personality.”

I paused as what I said sank in. I couldn’t. And I wasn’t so ergo...

“You aren’t either. You’ve become real.”

“Yes. In a manner none has been able to decipher as yet. We exist, as does all around us, somehow independent of the gaming program.”

“Then everything we ever programmed, exists somewhere in here, wherever here is, plus whatever you have imagined...I’m sorry, it boggles.” I turned to Allie.

30 “Even you.”

31 “Yes, Michael. I am real.”

32 “But I’m not. At least not here. I’m the figment.”

The bartender cleared his throat as he handed me a mug of beer.

“Only because you are also a part of that other reality. As you know, your brother is here, yet it is an entity totally separate from the consciousness that is Pat Kiedrowski out there. He could meet himself if he were to come inside. You cannot.”

“Why?”

“You have not been replicated. You have no analog.”

“So when I leave, “ I met Allie’s eyes, “there is no Mike Kiedrowski here anymore. You would be alone.”

33 Allie nodded silent tears running down her cheeks.

34 “But why?”

35 “Only the CPU knows.”

“Why haven’t I found out about this before? Obviously, this has been going on for some time. Why now?”

“There lies the crux of the matter. And once that has been solved, mayhap other answers will be revealed.”

I looked around the room. It struck me that no one was willing to speak of the problem. Finally the old man in the slouch hat stepped forward.

“We have been invaded. Another from your side has discovered our reality and he is responsible for your presence and, aye e’en your troubles. We have tried to confront the dastard but we

cannot. He has powers that we cannot stop nor battle. He works the very fabric of life to defeat us.”

“But Allfather, can’t you and the others, do this? I mean, you’re gods, for God’s sake.”

His face clouded at my thoughtless comment.

“Nay, sirrah, not as he. We can but influence what is present and of our mythos. He can work with all.”

“Who is he?”

“We know not. He favors voluminous cloaks and garish masks so we may not know of his true identity. But he works with the words of the CPU e’en as did thou earlier.”

I was puzzled for a moment, then realized they had somehow knew of the escape code I had thought. So, who ever was responsible for this mess was from the outside and well versed in what I had thought was a programming language shared only by my brother and I. That narrowed the field considerably. There were probably only a handful of known certified computer types who were capable of working on the level Oly and I did. And a similar number of hackers who could pick it up, given access to it. But Prometheus was well guarded against outside forces.

So that left some one inside or damn close.

Some one who obviously had it in for me. But I couldn’t think of anyone who fit in that category. Prometheus had been pretty much the sum of my life since college. If I wasn’t working, I was sleeping so my contacts outside of the project were nil. Part of me wanted to blow off the who of the problem and just deal with it but the

programmer part knew all too well how dangerous that could be. Unknown or misunderstood factors could bollix up a program in no time if they get ignored.

“So I guess I’d better do a bit of recon and see if I can figure out who this joker is. Anybody know where he is?”

36 “Where you will have to be.”

37 “Come again?”

38 “He awaits you.”

39 “Why doesn’t he come for me, if he wants me that bad?”

40 Odin smiled grimly.

“Even he can’t enter here. Yon portal opens on the gaming area, that field which lies within the machine’s control. We are safe here and beyond.”

“So all I have to do is find him, figure out a way to beat a guy who can work computer magic just so I can go back to someplace I really don’t want and leave what I do want.” I looked over the group. “Anyone with suggestions, feel free to jump in here anytime.”

Star smiled warmly for the first time.

“Finding him will be easier than you like. He stands across your life link.”

“Great, all I have to do is...”

It came to me. My life link. The I/O port that physically tied me in to the system. My hand went to my sore middle. Star nodded, her cryptic smile softening.

“As to battling this outside mage, who better than the CPU’s champion?”

“If I’m all the machine has for a champion, its in deep doodoo because I haven’t got the slightest idea of what to do.”

Allie came over and hugged me. She looked up and gave me a look I had come to perceive as exasperation.

“Michael, my love, you mustn’t under-rate yourself. He is an interloper, new to this.”

“And I’m not?”

“No. You built this, in your image. Everything here is nothing more than a manifestation of your life’s work. Certainly there are influences from the others, but it is you that has woven the matrix that made all this possible. You can do it.”

41 “How?”

42 “Programming.”

43 “I can’t program from in here.”

“Then we are lost for once he has dealt with you, nothing will be able to stand in his way and all that you have built will be his. Both inside and out.”

“I need to think about this.”

There was a knock at the door. Everyone jumped. We held the tableau for a minute, no one willing to open the door that could easily lead to maximal trouble. Finally I headed for the door, only to find my way blocked by the man with the scarred face.

“Let me.”

I started to protest but he grinned and unsheathed the most beautiful sword I had ever seen.

“Hey, its my job. There aren’t many times you get a call for a hero.”

Out beyond the stoop where Cerberus crouched growling stood my sons. At least I thought they were. I heard Allie cry out next to me. They had been twisted and reformed into gargoyles, monsters of the blackest ilk, their hideously deformed faces split with demonic grins.

“Can Mikey come out and play?”

“Any luck, Pat?”

“I think so. I’ve isolated some interesting activity in the background game routines. I don’t know where it’s coming from or exactly what it means but there are a couple of icons I can’t identify. Not yet. I’m trying to see if I can isolate them and ID their matrix. I think its Mike and Jackman but I don’t know which is which.”

I started for the door, black anger welling up through me. Before I could cross the threshold Star grabbed me and Oscar moved to block my path. Allie stepped in front of me.

“No, Mike. He’s trying to goad you into a confrontation before you’re ready.”

“Those are my sons he’s fucking with.”

“And mine. But you have to find out how you can help them. You can’t fight him unless you know how.”

I turned from the door. She was right and I didn’t like it. Whoever this asshole was he had just bought a sizable portion of Hell. And I had to find a way to deliver it.

Programming. That was the key. I could write him into oblivion if I just had a terminal and some time.

I looked over at the bartender's startled exclamation.

On the end of the bar was a Sabretronics station, just like the one in my office. I crossed to it, my hands poised over the keys. They stayed that way because I didn't have the faintest idea of where to start or even how. I didn't think this was going to be settled with a subroutine, no matter how gruesome. Nor did I have the time to write and debug anything powerful enough to do the job.

So I played a hunch. I typed in three letters.

"BINGO!"

Kissler turned sharply from his monitoring of Stosh's inert body to the split screen. Oly was grinning on the right half.

"I've got him, Bill. He's found a way to talk."

44 I almost fainted when the screen displayed

45 *'Mike?'*

46 My fingers flew.

47 *'Oly, What's the status?'*

'Your body is holding. I think Bartram Jackman has gotten inside and he's done something I can't find. Can you get out?'

'Negative. All the returns are null. I've got a situation here that has to be dealt with first. Can you give me what you have?'

48 *'Can you receive files?'*

49 *'I think so.'*

50 *'Standby.'*

I scanned the data as it scrolled down the screen. I didn't like it. Not even a little bit but it was more than I'd had. When it finished I began typing again.

51 *'Can you retrieve Jackman's icon?'*

52 *'Negative.'*

53 I paused.

54 *'Delete?'*

'Negative. Nothings responding like it should. Monitor only.'

55 *'Stand by. Keep me plugged in.'*

56 *'What if his icon moves for your port?'*

That one came out of left field. Could Jackman use my port and return to my body? Was a body just a receptacle or was the spirit or whatever the hell I was inside, keyed to a specific body? I didn't want to chance it.

57 *'Then pull it.'*

58 I waited for a response. And waited.

59 *'Oly?'*

60 Null. Nothing. Nada. Nadadamthing.

We were cut off. It made sense. The information had to be coming through the gaming area and Jackman controlled the field. Evidently he didn't like the idea. Then the screen came to life again.

'Naughty, naughty. You don't get off that easy, Kiedrowski.'

I started to type an answer when the keyboard and monitor began to smoke. I grabbed it off the bar and threw it out the door just seconds before it blew up in a spectacular explosion that would have blasted me and half the room.

Nor do you, asshole, I thought grimly.

I was isolated. I knew that if I tried to bring up another terminal, it would go the way of the first. Somehow Jackman had gotten control of the data net. Or access to it. I couldn't tap the routines to write him into Hell.

"Now what?" I said more to myself than anyone else but a new character spoke from beside me. He was wearing a sky blue robe and simple gold band on his brow. His face was older than Ararat, half hidden by bushy white eyebrows and a beard that hung to his waist. For a moment, I stood stunned before I realized that an archmage was probably easier to believe than gods. Just barely.

But he was also just what I needed.

Beside him was a handsome younger man dressed in royal blue and gold. He grinned and offered his hand, a shimmering ghost of a bracelet on his wrist.

61 "I take it you two have something?"

62 The elder Merlin nodded.

"A suggestion. It appears that your foe has gained control of the working system outside. You cannot use it as you once did. But perhaps you have something he neither knows nor suspects."

63 "I'm all ears."

64 He smiled.

"I would say such things with care. I, rather we wizards, mages and sorcerers, feel it is possible for you to work the very ether of this reality with thoughts and words. It is what your opponent appears to do. Your advantage is that it is your system. He is a newcomer who is just learning his powers. Also, he is not wanted. It is why he cannot pass into this tavern and beyond."

“But he just about blew it all to hell and gone.”

The younger Merlin stepped forward.

“Only because you gave him a conduit. You manifested a direct link to the operating system, something none of us has ever been able to do. I wouldn’t attempt that again.”

“No shit. It makes sense though. So what do we do now? I can’t imagine him wanting to give me a chance to figure this out and the longer I wait, the more firmly entrenched he will become out there. I remember this guy, he’s good. Given enough time he could subvert the whole thing.”

“Then we will have to move against him and you’ll have to do some fast OJT.”

I shook my head.

“Tall order, Merle. I’m trapped in here and I haven’t got the foggiest idea of where he is or what he’s up to. I don’t think brute force is an option and I can’t see us getting sneaky when he knows where we are and can watch the only door we have to use to get at him. Myself, I don’t care much for the scenario.”

Merlin grinned again and shook his head.

“Then I don’t suppose you want to hear how he has banded most of the evil types in the game program into an army that he’s been training just to keep things real interesting.”

“Shit.”

Merle laughed and pushed my beer towards me.

"It's not all that bad. We have some pretty high-octane heroes on this side who'll help. And the magic's corps is no bunch of pantywaists either. Remember who won in all those works in the referent files."

I started to feel a little better.

"Of course, this is a whole new ball game. We aren't working from a script and I think the villains are looking for a chance to rewrite some of those files."

"You can quit any time now." I turned to the room in general.

"Who's in charge around here?"

"That depends." Star answered from over by the door. "The elder Merlin is the main representative of the magical group but for the rest, well you'll have to pick who best suits what you plan. Some of us are stronger in certain areas than others but we all agree you're the boss for this run."

"Then I think the first order of business is to get some solid info on what we're up against physically. Locations, battle strengths and command structures. Once we've got that we can see who can go where. Also I need a current report on what we have to put in the field. As of now, the head of each pantheon and major storyline is in charge of their own people. Star, can you co-ordinate the fiction lines? Odin, mythology?"

She nodded as did Odin.

"We need to set up some kind of HQ, somewhere we can gather all this data and evaluate it. This place is going to be too small, so I'm open to suggestions."

65 “There’s a meeting hall in back.” The bartender suggested.

66 “How big is it”

67 He smiled.

68 “How big do you want it to be?”

69 “Oldtimer, I should know you but I can’t place the face.”

70 “I had the face changed. I’m Socrates.”

71 I stared for a moment, then laughed.

“Socrates, get some one else to man the bar, I want you on my General Staff. Also Benedict, Kamchak the Tuchuk, Robert E. and Saladin. There will be more, so if anyone has ideas, let’em fly. Merlin, you gather the mages and get me a list of who is available. Odin, you handle the warriors. Ruffio, you have the support group. Let’s go, people, we have a lot to do.”

As the group began to rearrange I waved Merle, Socrates and Tyr over to me.

“Gentlemen, I want each of you to act as liaison. Merle for Merlin, Tyr, you work with the Allfather. Socrates, let’s have a look at this hall.”

He headed for a door I hadn’t noticed before. But then I was beginning to get used to the idea of a malleable reality and its possibilities. The hall was big but not by half. We would need more floor space with plenty of tables. As I envisioned what would be required, I had to blink. Several times.

It was there.

I looked at the trio. Socrates was pulling at his chin, a thoughtful look on his face. Tyr was nodding grimly. And Merle was playing mumbly peg with his dagger in one of the tabletops.

“Needs better light.” Socrates commented.

The torches flared for a moment, bringing Merle’s head up in surprise, then the lights from the Astrodome appeared in the four corners of the room. I grinned at Merle.

“While we’re waiting for the others to get their data together, there’s something I want to try. I don’t like what Jackman has done to my boys. I figure he’s got to be reaching with his power or they would be in a lot worse shape than they are. Any thoughts on what the chances are of rescuing them?”

They looked at each other before Tyr decided to speak.

“I would say that is correct as far as it goes. He’s got to have some kind of support close by to defend against a rush. They would have no such constraints on their physical activity.”

72 “Socrates?”

73 “I would concur.

“Then it would seem that sneaky is going to be the order of business for this one. What we’re going to need, though, is a distraction. Tyr, can you get Oscar and a few more of the burly types gathered at the front door? I’d say 8 or 10 should do.”

74 “Easily.”

75 I nodded.

76 “Then be about it. I’ll be out in a few minutes.”

After Tyr had left, Merle flipped his dagger high and watched it quiver in the table.

“That’s real sneaky, Boss.” he said dryly.

I ignored his sarcasm . “Is Ghostwheel available?”

Merle paused then looked at me with a grin.

"I think so. Ghost?"

There was a short pause then a shimmering gold ring appeared nearby.

'Yes, Dad?"

"Ghost, I want you to meet Mike Kiedrowski."

'Really? Far out, man. The big Kahuna, pleased to meet ya, Stosh'

I looked at Merle who shrugged his shoulders.

"He's been researching the 60's."

"Great, a hippy deus machina. Ghost, can you slip outside without Jackman knowing?"

'Nope.'

"Then that shoots my plan. Anybody got another?"

'I can slide through pretty quick though. He'll know I'm there but unless he's faster than the mainframe CPU, I'll be gone before he can do anything.'

I glared at the ring.

"A smart ass hippy. Can you carry passengers?"

77 'Piece a quiche."

78 "Then here's what we do."

The group of warriors gathered at the front door was impressive. Besides the ones I had named there was a GI with sergeant stripes and a tommy gun, a blonde guy with a light saber

and a handful of sword swingers from various lines. They were the best I could remember and they were all ready for a brawl.

“OK, people, here’s the plan. When we swing the door open I want everybody out as quick as you can. Form up in a skirmish line with weapons ready. When I give the signal, we hit them hard. Rock, you and the Wookiee cover the door. I don’t want anything slipping by. Then when I call the retreat, get back inside. If anyone is too involved to make the jump, the nearest two help out. I want this to be done quick. Don’t worry about how much damage we do this time out. The main purpose of this is to get my sons clear. We’ll hit them hard once we get some organization. Any questions? All right, let’s get set.”

I took a look through the peephole in the door. Rolly and Olly were still out in the parking lot. They seemed to be by themselves but I highly doubted it. There was too much cover close in and Jackman was no fool. Once we showed outside the door, that lot would get full of God knew what in a hurry. I reached for the knob.

“Ah, Stosh,” Oscar said quietly from my elbow, “don’t you think you’d better gear up or something?”

I gave him a grin that didn’t reach the blackness in my eyes.

“You boys just be set to come out when I call. This joker has called the tune, I want to see what kind of dancer he is.”

I opened the door and stepped out onto the stoop. The boys looked up at me, what was left of their faces splitting in caricatures of grins.

“Hey, Pop! Wanna come play?” Rolly said.

“Not now Son. Its time to come in.”

They exchanged an evil look. They had noticed my jeans and flannel shirt and it seemed they had their own instructions.

“Sure thing, Pop. We’re gonna need a little help though.”

They both raised a leg and chains rattled. They were fixed to a ring set in the asphalt that was behind them. I knew it hadn’t been there a moment ago but I didn’t want Jackman to know that.

I started to puff myself up until I felt my face getting red and headed for the boys. I was halfway there when the brush came alive with all kinds of activity. I heard the door open behind me just as I materialized my chain gun and body armor. It was on auto track , the barrels spinning at 10,000 rpm. Violet jackets of power sheathed the 2mm flechettes of depleted uranium death that screamed through the air.

In a matter of seconds the lot between me and the boys was a howling melee. Jackman was pulling out all the stops. He wanted this over quickly so he was throwing masses of demons, monsters, djinns and whatever else had aligned with his cause. Even the class of heroes I had behind me wouldn’t be able to hold out long against these odds. I backpedaled until I was in the front of our ragged line, my chain gun like a living wand of destruction in my fist. I was howling like a madman and only partly from acting.

Suddenly, behind the wall of nether beasts, a familiar gold ring materialized over the boys. No one noticed it but me as it expanded directly above their heads and sank with incredible speed. When it touched the ground it vanished along with my boys. I yelled out the retreat command and my line began to disengage and men dove

through the door. Jackman's creatures screamed in frustrated anger as they tried to press through but Rock's chopper, Chewie's bowcaster and my blaster held them back until we were the only one's left on the stoop. I waved the others through. Chewie bellowed his reluctance but hands grabbed him from inside and pulled him back with Rock right on his heels. I flipped the selector to max power and fanned coruscant death through the front ranks, then dove through the door.

I looked around at the group of heroes. Every one was gore spattered but it appeared most of it wasn't theirs. And everyone was accounted for.

"Ruffio, get these guys checked out and cleaned up. Soc, set up the house."

Oscar shouldered his way to the front, the Lady Vivamus dripping gore on the floor.

"But we failed. We didn't get anywhere near your sons."

I saw Ally at the edge of the crowd, her face collapsing at Oscar's words.

"Sorry, Oscar, but we didn't fail. I didn't want to tell you that all we were was the rabbit but the boys are clear."

I made my way over to Allie and gave her a hug.

"Let's go check with Merle."

We slipped through the press and went through a door just past the bar. Merle was inside. He was alone.

"Where are they?"

“Ghost took them to an alternate. Merlin and a few of the other mages are with them. What ever Jackman did doesn’t want to come undone.”

Allie’s hands clenched on my arm until I thought she would draw blood. She looked up at me.

“Mike? What if they can’t help the boys?”

79 “Ghost? Bring me through.”

80 Merle protested. “Mike, they’re doing everything they can.”

81 I waved him off.

82 “Allie, stay here with Merle.”

83 “But Mike, what can you do that the best magicians can’t?”

“This isn’t magic, love. Jackman’s manipulating the base program. He’s good but this is my bailiwick. I’ll be back.”

84 ‘Some one call a cab?’

85 “Take me to the boys.”

86 ‘Dad?’

87 Merle shrugged as he put an arm around my wife.

88 ‘All aboard.’

As Ghost settled over me I was in the alternate world. It was barren red rock plateau with a chartreuse sky shot with purple clouds. In the center of the plateau five magicians stood at the points of a pentagram with Rolly and Olly in the center. They were howling and tearing at themselves as waves of etheric energy bathed and caressed them. Jackman had built in some nasty counter features that reacted violently with magic.

“Enough!” I yelled. The energies wavered then withdrew to each of the mages who turned to look at me. They held to their

positions, their faces glistening from their efforts.

“He has wrought most perfidiously, Michael.” Merlin said from the lead point. “We cannot find the point of undoing.”

“And you won’t. Jackman didn’t use magic. You five just maintain the wards.”

Before any of them could say anything I stepped over the pentagram and faced what was left of my sons. They were cowering in the center, their faces torn and bloody from where their claws and the rough stone had cut them in their agony. Olly was dazed but Rolly looked at me. Behind the malevolence in his deformed eyes was my son, crying for help. I could see he was fighting the implanted commands Jackman had left. My heart swelled with pride and love. Maybe he was just a figment of wishful thinking but he was, they were still my boys.

“Get out, Dad. Before he makes me hurt you.”

“Don’t worry, Rolly. You can’t hurt me.”

His face twisted, his jaws champing. Noxious drool sprayed the area as he shook his head. Jackman’s orders ran deep but his love ran deeper. Finally, with an anguished howl he launched himself at my throat.

I grabbed his wrists and held him back by main force. Jackman had revved up his strength and his claws were wicked four-inch black things. They reached for my throat, slashing across my skin. I shifted my form to match his, my skin thickening and hardening so his claws scratched ineffectually across the surface. I willed my face to mirror his. He stared, frozen by the change. Then I reached

through the fabric of my thoughts and remolded him in his normal shape. He shuddered and his body flowed like warm wax in a sculptor's hands. Sweat ran down my face as I fought the code Jackman had written him in. He was good. Damn good. His guards were some of the toughest ice I had ever ran across but in the end it wasn't enough. I knew the master codes.

With Rolly back to normal, I turned my attention to Oliver. It was easier finding the code strings and rewriting them to the original. When I was done I motioned for the mages to drop the wards, sat down and gathered my sons into my arms. I still wore the horror so they were a bit reluctant.

"It's all over. He can't get at you any more. I know what he did to you was horrible but you guys have to realize he did it to you. He did it to get at me." I began to shift back to my original form. "What he does isn't magic. Not like the wizards and mages like Merlin use. Only he and I can do this stuff and he's evil. He wants to destroy me and take over the whole machine. I've got to stop him before he does that. Do you understand?"

Olly just stared at me with wide four-year-old eyes. Roland nodded

"We did some pretty bad stuff, Pop."

"No, son, he did it. He used you to do his dirty work because he was afraid to meet me face to face. He still is."

89 "Dad?" Olly said quietly.

90 "Yes?"

91 "Can you make yourself look like Mickey Mouse?"

92 I ruffled his hair and hugged him.

“When this is all over, kiddo. Right now, we’ve got to get back to Mom. She’s worried sick and needs some hugs from you two. You guys try to forget what he made you do. Its all in the past and won’t happen again.”

I called Ghost and told him to take us back. I hoped what I had told the boys was true. Deep inside me was a voice that kept asking what if. What if I couldn’t beat Jackman. I didn’t like the answer.

It was all set. Intel had told us Jackman had concentrated his forces at the port that led to my body. It was logical. His plug had been pulled so the only way out was to my body and only one of us could use it. He couldn’t until I was terminated. I couldn’t without going through him. I didn’t like the reports on his troop strengths. He had gathered every manjack who had even the slightest inclination to evil. I was sorry to see how many it really was. Granted our hearts were pure and all that crap, but still his troops were looking to realign the basic outcome of every matrix in the system.

And worse, the longer I waited, the closer Jackman came to discovering the master code strings and realigning them. It didn’t look any too good for the home team. We had sent out organizers who had gathered the heroes and followers of good. Under the Allfather, Star and Ruffio we had an expanding network. If we had the time to consolidate it. They were forming up near where Jackman had built his castle of obsidian. It was being fortified by his own circle of sorcerers, necromancers, warlocks, witches and any evil magic user he could find. Our group was working feverishly to find a way to bring it down but it was difficult at a distance.

I called a war council in the backroom. We would have to move soon and we needed a sure fire game plan. Jackman would be watching for Ghost now. What he could do to stop him was a big question mark even the Ghostwheel couldn't answer. Plus Jackman had seen a little of what I could do in that little foray. Hopefully I had a few tricks he couldn't foresee.

I looked at the gathering. There were a few faces I had wished were with us. They were the demi-heroes who hovered on the edge of good and evil, order and chaos. Almost all of them had thrown in with Jackman. I was about to call the meeting to order when Socrates caught my eye from the door. I waved him over.

"Some one to see you, Mike. Jackman sent him." He pointed over his shoulder.

His immense bulk filled the door. The hilt of a sword stood over his shoulder and even across the expanse of the room I felt the impact of those cold blue eyes. He was one I had wished had come with us but I figured he would have a pretty high rank in Jackman's command staff. I motioned Merle over and told him to run things until I got back then went to meet Jackman's emissary. It wasn't easy going into a small room alone with him.

"What do you have, Oly?" Kissler asked. The younger Kiedrowski had been busy at the master terminal for the better part of an hour. Kissler had only a vague idea of what the burly engineer was up to but he knew that it was aimed at giving Stosh a better chance at getting out alive.

"I'm trying to isolate Jackman's code. He's good. So far all I've been able to do is harass him. Maybe if I can keep him busy Mike

can come up with something on the inside. I know Jackman is trying to crack the master codes so I've been working on rewriting them. Whenever he makes a run on them, I hit him so he has to fall back. Then I work on the master codes some more. It's rough though. He's faster than I am but something else is keeping him from dedicating too much time on the codes. I figure its Mike."

"What are the chances?"

"How the hell should I know? I don't have any idea of what those two are doing or how they're doing it. I'm just throwing a joker into the deck whenever I can and hope it helps. I just wish I could contact him."

The move was on. The forces of good were gathered before the black castle on a great plain that had only just come into being. Jackman, clad in a glistening black robe heavily worked with gold and jewels stood on the balcony of the highest tower surveying the gathered forces. Behind him, his chief advisor and general, Kane, stood silently. Lightning shot out of the roiling clouds overhead but danced off at oblique angles when they angled for the tents on the plain. Jackman turned in disgust and stormed into the tower. Kane looked over the field one last time, then followed.

The chamber was a mad combination of a Frankensteins laboratory, a sultans throne room, a medieval sorcerers chamber and a Parisian cathouse. Jackman proceeded to the sole modern fixture in the room, a Sabretronics terminal that stood on an ornate table Ali Baba would have killed for. He punched a few keys and scanned the writing on the screen. With a satisfied nod he turned to Kane.

“Kiedrowski is in their main command tent?”

93 Kane nodded. “Yyrkoon’s demon watched him arrive.”

94 “Excellent. Is all in readiness?”

95 Again the short nod.

“Once the attack has begun, I want special attention given to Kiedrowski. He is not to be given even a moment’s pause. I don’t think anything will be able to take him, but I want all our forces concentrated on just that. Hammer him into the ground. The simps won’t realize we’ve sealed the castle or that I have a special surprise waiting for them. We’ll just keep pounding away until I’m ready to smash Kiedrowski into infinity.”

Jackman chuckled as he poured himself a glass of wine.

“Let it begin, Kane. Cry havoc and turn loose the dogs of war.”

Kane nodded and left the room.

In a short while, the sounds of battle lifted from the plain below. Jackman strolled back onto the balcony and watched as his forces flowed out of the castle and engaged the enemy. He laughed darkly as he recognized the form of his hated foe at the front of the defense.

“The fool. He’s even using the same blaster.”

Jackman looked to the side and saw his own futuristically armored troops move to the van. The energy from Kiedrowski’s blaster rolled off their armor as they advanced. Jackman swirled his cape about him and went inside, chuckling to himself.

Now that Kiedrowski was otherwise occupied, he could concentrate on breaking into the main processor. His efforts had

been thwarted so far by the man below but now he had other things on his mind. Seating himself at his keyboard, Jackman began to program. Minutes later he entered his new viral attack. The screen pulsed for a moment, then flashed null input.

With a curse Jackman tried again, this time running a short vicious string of code aimed at opening the door. It also contained a segment meant to attack Kiedrowski directly. The pause was longer this time, followed by an invalid command message directed at one line of his program. Better, he thought. He was beginning to work on another entry when he sensed a presence behind him.

He whirled to find Kane standing in the door. For a moment, he relaxed, then remembered Kane was supposed to be outside the sealed tower. He rose slowly, a string of code of particularly malevolent force forming in his mind.

“What is the meaning of this, Kane? You are supposed to be directing the attack.”

The man called Kane smiled darkly.

“Let us say I don’t particularly trust your intentions. Nor your surprise.”

96 Jackman glowered at his lieutenant.

97 “You will regret that.”

He loosed the code string. Waves of energy and force swept across the room and engulfed the burly swordsman/mage. His skin blackened and sloughed off in the face of the gale of power. Smoke rose and filled the doorway, inundating the room with a foul smell. Jackman turned back to his computer.

“Is that the best you can do?”

Jackman turned back in stunned disbelief. In the doorway stood not his torched general, but his enemy.

I had gotten the gist of his string as he had loosed it and slipped myself ahead in time, leaving a body for his bolt to fry. This business of code magic was getting easier to understand. I was impressed that Jackman was able to wreak the havoc he was without direct access to the master code. It was something I intended to take care of once this was over. Provided I won.

The surprise I was hoping for was short lived. Jackman recovered and wove a sphere of energy around himself and his terminal. I had been expecting that and loosed my own sphere around his. The screen of his terminal went blank. Jackman howled in rage and frustration as he smashed the hapless computer. He turned to glare at me. What little piece of sanity he had retained was gone. In its place a feral cunning glowed from behind his eyes. I began work on a shield spell. It was almost complete when Jackman laughed and lunged for a tapestry at the back of the room. He tore it down and wheeled down the tunnel behind it at a fantastic speed.

I cursed myself for a fool. My sphere of insulation had effectively isolated him from using the computer to counter-attack. I had figured it would force him to retaliate with a physical attack. He wanted me dead and there I was, right in front of him. I raced down the tunnel but I knew I couldn't win. He was headed for my body and the ultimate victory. I had no idea what would happen if he achieved

his goal and I didn't want to find out. I skidded to a stop, his maniacal laughter ringing off the walls.

"Pat, what's wrong?"

Oly ignored Kissler as he requested confirmation for the command string that had appeared on the terminal screen. When it came he looked up at the doctor.

"Pull the plug. NOW!"

Kissler reacted before the implications of the order hit his conscious mind. He yanked the cable connecting Stosh to the machine free of the headset. Instantly the monitors went into full alarm as Mike's body went inert.

I could hear his howl before I reached the end of the cable. He was throwing himself against the blank stone wall that had moments before been his gate to victory. He turned as he heard me.

"You fool. You've killed yourself."

I shrugged. The pain in my stomach vanished, my last link to reality severed. Part of me felt the loss but it had to be.

"Tell them to hook it back up. There's still time. You've won, damn you."

"No way, Jackman."

"You aren't willing to die just to stop me. Have them hook us both back up. You have to do it. You aren't a killer."

The walls of the tunnel began to glow and the air was getting noticeably warmer. Oly was following my instructions. Jackman looked around wildly.

“What’s happening? What have you done?”

“They’ve thrown the cable into the incinerator. In a few minutes it will be ashes. We’re going down together, Jackman. Are you ready?”

With a maddened scream, he lunged for me and I spoke the final command that loosed the erase string I had written on my way down the tunnel. He faded to nothing as his hands reached my throat.

It certainly was warm in an incinerator.

Doctor Kissler put the shock pads back on the cart and looked across Mike’s body at Pat. They had been working for the last fifteen minutes, trying to keep the body physically alive but all their efforts failed. The elder Kiedrowski brother was gone, his body cooling. Pat leaned against the table behind him, staring blankly at what he had done. Kissler walked around and stood between the two.

“Pat, there wasn’t any choice. Jackman had to be stopped. If he had gotten into Mike’s body, there wouldn’t have been anything we could do to convince the world it wasn’t Mike anymore.

Pat raised bleak eyes that streamed tears he didn’t even notice.

“Doesn’t make it right. He’s still gone.”

“Are you sure?”

Oly’s eyes hardened but Kissler pressed on quickly.

“Look, Pat, Jackman was still alive after we disconnected his body. Maybe Mike is too.”

98 Oly thought hard for a moment.

99 “Leave him hooked up to life support.”

Pat sat at terminal and began the search for the icon he had finally identified as his brothers. He tried several levels of search while Kissler brought back the life support cocoon. When the unit was in place he turned and shook his head.

“No dice, Doc. I can’t find him.”

Pat was sitting in his desk chair, staring at the holograph of San Francisco on the wall behind him , a half empty bourbon bottle in his fist when I walked in.

“Yo, bro.”

He turned, falling against the desk. The bottle dropped to the carpet and gurgled hollowly. I went over and picked it up. He stared at me in shock. I lifted the bottle and took a pull before I handed it back.

100 “You look like you could use some.”

101 “Mike? It can’t be. You’re...”

102 “Dead? I don’t think so.”

“Damn it, I put your body in the cooler myself over an hour ago.”

103 I shivered and took another drink.

104 “I know. But I’m here now.”

I didn’t like the look in his eyes. I could see he was torn between fear and relief with fear winning.

“It just took me awhile to figure out how to get back once the hardware link was gone but Pat, you’ve been inside. You know the

feeling in your gut, that cord that ties you to the real. We always figured it was a symbol of the link cables, it's more. Much more."

Slowly he reached for the bottle then froze, a new fear flaring in his eyes.

"No, Jackman is dead. He might have pulled the switch if the cables had stayed hooked up but once they were gone, he had no connection to reality. In his mind, his body was dead and he knew that if he didn't make it into mine, he was too. He might have made the jump back to his own body if he hadn't cut himself off so thoroughly."

Oly took the bottle and drank, his eyes never leaving my face. When he lowered it, he wiped his mouth with his hand, tears welling in his eyes.

"But your body was dead for over an hour. You should be a vegetable."

105 I gave him a wry grin.

106 "It wasn't my time."

I watched as Oly's car pulled out of the ramp. He wasn't totally convinced everything was all right but he would make it. Time would gloss over the discrepancies. I got in my car and drove out through the gate shack. Only Oly and Doc Kissler knew what had happened tonight and they only knew what had happened in the lab. There would be some flack over Jackman's death but I knew we would weather that storm.

I pulled onto the interstate. A mile up the road I turned off, the cool Wisconsin night growing moist and warm. Another couple

minutes and I pulled into my driveway. In spite of the hour, the lights in the kitchen were on. I went in the back door.

107 Ally met me with a hug and a kiss.

108 “The boys in bed?”

109 She smiled and nodded.