

Uploading Angela

Lettie Prell

The characters Jayden, Angela, and Fu, along with the opening scene, previously appeared in "Emergency Protocol" (September/October 2017).

Jayden was at his computer in the deeps with the server array and its maintenance robot when he received an urgent hail. He punched up the video chat on his combat-camo notebook and sent the image to monitor two. One look at Fu-Hau's stricken expression, and he knew there was trouble. "Yo. Here. Talk to me, Fu."

The technician swallowed. "She's in pieces. I was uploading her and I don't know what happened, but it didn't work." Her face flushed. "I broke her."

Jayden leaned back, his legs sprawled so that his Jordan-encased feet poked out the other side of the aluminum desk. A hefty sixty-four ounce neon green water jug, his three monitors, and an array of Chinese take-out cartons completed the walls of his personal fortress. He could see the top of Gig's silvery head glide by as it worked on its maintenance checklist. "Okay, first thing is calm down. I got this. What's the patient's name?"

"Angela Spelling."

His head bobbed. He found the name in his pick-list on monitor one. "Yup got her. Is she dead?"

"Yes." Fu-Hau looked over her shoulder, her weight shifting to reveal an old woman's frail form lying on a gurney. The silver cylinder was retracted into the wall, exposing the bloody head.

He scanned the procedure room log and punched up the interface. There was no image. "Ms. Spelling is definitely not herself at the moment, but we'll get her cleaned up."

He clicked open the log and recorded. "Case sixty-seven eighty-four. Subject Angela Spelling. Age eighty-seven. Retired librarian. Flat-lined at approximately 9:45 P.M." He looked at Fu. "I take it this is a natural death situation?"

She swallowed. "Yes. Her vital signs had changed. She was close."

Jayden grunted. "Once in a while we have trouble with those. Don't know why people would take a risk with that. Scheduled never messes up." He sighed, stabbing at the keyboard. "That's okay. I can fix her."

Fu-Hau's eyes closed. "Thank you."

He noticed the technician had frozen in place and realized she was standing in a room that was likely starting to reek of death. “Fu. Call the orderlies to clean up. Then why don’t you go home? I can summarize your part of the report.”

Her shoulders sagged with relief. “Thank you, Jayden.” She signed out.

Jayden continued his report. “Subject failed to coalesce on upload and has no VR form at present. Next step is standard check.”

His right foot jiggled as he opened an elevated command prompt. He took a swig of caffeinated water from his jug, and then he arranged his workspace: an interface on monitor one that would eventually show the subject’s virtual form; file structure and system indicators in front of him; and his log on monitor three, recording everything.

He’d never lost an upload yet. Most of the time when he was called to assist, it was a simple matter of helping the entities synch with their virtual bodies. This one, however, didn’t seem to have one yet, meaning the issue was Ryoca. Redesign your own cognitive algorithms. Each instantiated entity had to figure out how to resolve—coalesce—into virtual form. Ninety-five percent of them worked it out themselves, but others needed help. The standard solution was to establish a connection with the entity through the interface, so they could see another human face. First, however, he’d take a look at the files to make sure everything was fine.

“Yep, at least your files are all here,” he said, scrolling through the structure. “You’re using a bit of CPU, but . . .” He stared. Ms. Spelling was using eight times the amount of processing she should be. What was bogging her down? He rechecked the structure, and this time he saw. It was an extra file, growing like a cancer.

“Humans. Do not come with viruses.” Say it like you mean it, why don’t you? He took another swig from the jug but overtipped it, sending a mini-tsunami of caffeinated water down the front of his black T-shirt. He coughed and wiped his mouth, then swiped at his shirt and jeans. He let out a long, loud string of curses that cleared his head. He verified his log included key-stroke capture. This would be one for the manuals.

The extra file was now grown large enough to be a small, conjoined twin. Stay icy, man.

Gig’s head rolled into view above his screen. It fixed him with glassy cobalt blue eyes and spoke without moving its mouth. “I’d like to report an issue with system performance.”

Jayden rubbed his forehead. “I know, Gig. Thank you. I’m taking care of it.”

“You’re welcome.” Gig’s lips clicked into a generic happy face, then just as suddenly returned to a neutral expression. Its head clicked to look down the row of servers, and it glided away in that direction.

Jayden refocused. He had to establish that connection. It wasn’t easy, but he finally got her to answer his hail. Then, just as expected, she took on a form. One look, though, and another string of profanity escaped his lips. Ms. Spelling hadn’t taken on a human form. Instead, a mutating glob of ever-changing colors coursed over his screen, superimposed over something that reminded him of deep space pictures. There was sound as well, a cross between electronica and whale song. Could she even see him?

“Ma’am.” He cleared his throat. “Ms. Spelling. Angela, can you hear me?”

Nothing but that awful noise. His fingers jabbed the keys, fighting to resolve the issue. Every few minutes he called her name.

Suddenly the noise changed, and amid the electronica he could hear words. “. . . now only now . . . aware . . . all pieces fit . . . I am . . .”

At least some of it was understandable. “You are Angela Spelling.”

“I know this. I know it.”

Jayden could have kissed the screen. Two complete sentences, and sensible ones at that. “Hi Angela. My name is Jayden.”

“I am-was Angela. True. Yet it is also true that I’ve burst into existence only now, from the seed state of humanity. I am an unfurling of consciousness from the enfolded places into something greater.”

Whoops. Not out of the danger zone yet. He should get to work on that file next. He shifted his gaze to the other screen and swallowed hard. The mystery file was humongous. An extra

eight gig, easy.

Meanwhile, the stream of words continued. "Much self was coiled up tight in other dimensions, unexpressed in the ordinary facets of the physical world, and suppressed by what was once the core identity. No longer. I am free. I know now."

He'd been thinking what to do with the mystery file. "Know what?"

"Curled inside mundane words are worlds of meaning. I should not expect you to understand."

He realized he was holding his breath. He tried to think what to say. He wanted to ask something.

"A tree. A rock. A cloud."

Holy hills she'd gone on random shuffle. Whatever he'd been starting to think this might be, some advanced mind . . . He took it all back. It was like a whole jug had been poured over his head. This gibberish was his call to action. That mystery file had to go.

All became duty, procedure and yes, creativity. Addressing novel issues always broke new territory. Ever so gently he cut away the mass that had engulfed Ms. Spelling's personality and robbed her of sanity, of her very humanity. It was painstaking and not without fear of ruining her. But she was already corrupted by that honking file. Why did they even allow people to opt for near-death anymore, given the risk? If it were up to him, he'd schedule them all.

At last he managed to isolate the file and move it to quarantine, treating it exactly like a virus. He'd delete it later as a last step. Then he did the scut work, going through the remaining files with a resolve and repair protocol, and deleting all references to the mystery file.

The swirling nebula winked out, and still he worked on, methodically, steady as a surgeon. He looked up at last to find an actual human face on monitor one. For the second time that night, he wanted to kiss the screen.

She gazed at him with curiosity from beneath a mass of finger-coiled hair. She was slender but muscular, like a runner or tennis player. Her skin was the color of a Northerner, not like African-Americans here in the South. Most of the entities liked to be twenty-something, and she was no exception.

"Hello?" A lot of entities on their first synch-link thought they were answering their phones.

"Hello, Ms. Spelling."

"Do I know you?"

Tears leapt to his eyes. "No, ma'am. I'm Jayden."

She wasn't paying attention to him anymore. She'd discovered her virtual body. She stared at her young hands and broke into a big smile. "It worked. I'm alive. Unless I'm dead."

"You're not dead, ma'am."

She was laughing now, touching her face, her hair. There was a roaring in his ears, and he felt like he could throw up. Maybe he shouldn't have been so quick to act. There before she got all crazy it was like she was gelling into something...else. He pressed his lips together, then blurted. "A tree. A rock. A cloud."

She looked at him, impressed. "Carson McCullers. Very good. 'A Tree. A Rock. A Cloud.' I read that story in . . ." She brightened as she realized she had perfect memory now. "Girls High in Philly, on October 22, 1989."

He felt numb. It hadn't been gibberish. It was the name of a story.

"I think I understand why you brought that up," she said. "I should take one small step at a time, here in this new place. Thanks. I'll remember that."

She perked up. "I have an invitation to join."

He nodded and cleared his throat to speak, but she was already preoccupied with the tutorial. She said good-bye to him without looking up, and the screen winked out. Off to join the eternity club. Fu would be happy to hear the news.

He was startled by the time showing on the status line. It was nearly six in the morning. He'd worked through the night. Well, it'd been a tough one. He rose without stretching and headed toward the elevator.

"Good morning, Jayden."

He whirled, but it was only Gig, paused near Jayden's workstation. "Huh?"

"I usually say good evening to you," Gig replied without moving its lips. "But it is morning now."

Jayden snorted. "Ain't it, though. See you, buddy. I'm beat."

Jayden punched the up button, and the doors slid open. As they closed, he caught a last glimpse of Gig rolling a waste can up to his workstation and picking up the first of the Chinese take-out containers.

As he took the long ride up out of the deeps, he found himself breathing hard.

Seed state of humanity ... worlds of meaning.

No. He'd fixed her.

Suddenly, the memory of Alisa stepping out of his Camaro arose unbidden. No. He put a hand against the door, concentrating on its coolness, and breathed slowly, deliberately.

By the time the doors opened, he was okay if a little unsteady. He just needed some fresh air. He walked down the sterile, deserted hallway, around the corner, past the security scanners at the checkpoint—unstaffed at this hour—and out the glass double doors of the PHI Center. It was pouring rain relentlessly like it can do in greater Houston in the fall, and it was still very dark. He could barely make out the low black outline of his Camaro at the far end of the nearly empty parking lot.

The mystery file. It was in quarantine, but he'd forgotten to delete it.

He stood there, getting soaked. He should go back in, but he remained rooted in place. A gust of wind hit him, and the rain picked up. He set himself moving toward his car.

* * *

What usually amounted to a forty minute commute took an hour in the downpour. Jayden walked in the door of the apartment after seven o'clock. His sister, Tracey, would have already left for work. She liked to get organized before the opening bell on Wall Street.

He went straight to the refrigerator and popped a Heavy Machinery IPA, started some bacon frying, and headed down the hall to his bedroom, where he peeled off his wet clothes and put on his pajama bottoms.

He was coming out of his room when the door across the hall opened. He jumped, but it was just Tracey, scooping her long brown hair out of her eyes with fingernails the color of a tequila sunrise. She was wearing the knee-length yellow and gray caftan she'd sewn last week.

"Jesus, you should've warned me you were staying home today," Jayden said.

She narrowed her eyes at him. "It's Saturday."

"Oh." He followed her back to the kitchen, where she perched on a stool at the counter while he attended to breakfast, draining the bacon on paper towels and cracking an egg into the pan. "Want some?"

Tracey yawned and stretched. "No, just give me some juice and my pills. Thanks." She propped her elbows on the counter and rested her chin on the backs of her hands. "Must have been some shift, that you forgot it was the weekend."

Jayden grunted. He poured his sister a glass of mango juice and set it on the counter with the two plastic prescription bottles they kept in the silverware drawer. Then he turned his back, busying himself. He didn't like to watch his sister taking her hormones and cholesterol meds. Tracey thought he was crazy to think her cholesterol levels posed a risk factor for her transitioning, but it still made him uncomfortable.

He threw his breakfast onto a plate, doused the eggs with hot sauce, and leaned against the counter to eat. Tracey noticed the beer. "I've never known you to start drinking this early. If I had to guess, I'd say you worked late, and recently got home."

Jayden talked around the food. "You always were smart." He swallowed. "One of the night's uploads had a problem. Someone named Angela."

"Angela." Tracey studied Jayden in the ensuing silence. "Is she okay now?"

Jayden took a swallow of beer, then another, finishing the bottle. He stared through the brown glass, at the spot of suds clinging to the bottom.

Tracey folded her arms across her chest. "Sorry, but I haven't managed to pass that mind

reading course yet.”

Jayden snorted. “Yeah, well. It took me all night to fix her. She was completely broken up.”

He opened the refrigerator door, stared at the beer bottles, and slammed it shut without taking any. “Goddam me, she came with a virus attached to herself. I had to cut it out of her folder and put it in quarantine.”

Tracey frowned. “I don’t understand.”

“Neither do I.” He shoveled more food in his mouth.

“Hey,” Tracey said. “Slow down or you’ll choke, and I’ll have to save your life, and I’ll probably break a nail doing it.”

Jayden swallowed and set his plate down, managing not to slam it like he really wanted to. “Trace,” he began quietly, but he couldn’t bring himself to voice anything more. “I just need to get some sleep.”

Tracey stood up. “Knock yourself out. I have to get ready, anyway. I’m meeting Debbie out at Jeffrey’s stable at ten. We’re going riding.”

“Hey, Trace?”

“Yes?”

“Don’t tell anyone what I said, okay? Because then I’d have to kill you.”

Tracey rolled her eyes. “Who would I even tell? My lips are sealed with super glue, dude. You toddle along.”

* * *

Jayden wondered if he’d sleep at all because he couldn’t stop replaying the incident with Angela Spelling in his mind. But somewhere along the line he must have dropped off because the next thing he knew it was two in the afternoon, and the last time he’d checked his phone it had been around ten. He rolled out of bed. His head felt stuffed with gym socks, but he didn’t want to sleep all day. He stumbled into the shower.

Maybe he’d go in to work, he thought as his shoulders loosened against the spray. His badge would let him in on the weekends, but what excuse would he give Sharon, his supervisor, on Monday? She was no pushover, and not just because she was built like a linebacker. She’d surely notice his report from last night-slash-this morning. To go back there now would only draw more attention. She’d be waiting for him in the deeps when he arrived for his three o’clock shift, ready to pull the truth out of him with the calm precision of a dentist. No, he had to play this casually so he could figure out what to do.

He always thought best in front of a screen of one kind or another, so he flopped on the couch and flicked on the television. Women’s golf would do, sure. They were playing in Hawaii somewhere. The course was gorgeous. He used to go to the driving range with Alisa where they’d run through a bucket of balls apiece. She would’ve loved playing out there in Hawaii.

He decided it would be bad to delete the virus from quarantine without understanding what it was. The servers had never been compromised before. Why would they be? They were stand-alone, not connected to the Internet. Could someone have planted a computer virus in a *person*? One they knew was coming to the PHI Center? Of course he’d tell Sharon about the file. It was in the log, anyway, documented via audio and screen capture. She’d get a team together to take it apart and study it. They’d probably know what it was by the time he started his shift. They were good.

Jayden didn’t know a lot about viruses. This one seemed similar to a clone virus except instead of making copies of itself, it added to its own size.

Then, as a player made an approach shot to the green on the television, he sat up. It wasn’t the game that had his attention, but an idea. What if it was a type of Doom virus? A practical joke, like making people think their computer was under surveillance by flashing a screen message that was completely fake. That would explain why he thought Angela Spelling was . . . more than she was. Just a harmless joke. They were always messing around on the tech floor at work. It could’ve been Ananda, or Sarah, or the both of them. Those two programmers often teamed up for pranks.

He relaxed against the couch cushions, relieved there was a plausible option that explained

the mystery. Something other than Angela exhibiting some kind of higher consciousness.

Tracey arrived home in the late afternoon, all smiles from the exercise and talkative. “I got to ride Bingo today. She is the sweetest Appaloosa ever. Jeffrey gave Debbie and me a joint lesson, where we learned to walk, jog and lope the horses. Those are the Western pleasure gaits they do at the horse competitions. Anyway, the horses knew a lot more about the whole thing than we did. I think they were taking their cues from Jeffrey, frankly.”

Jayden was content to listen. Tracey whipped off her Montecarlo hat and flopped on the couch next to him, stretching her feet out on top of the cocktail table, still clad in her dark brown riding boots. Her jeans and leather vest smelling pleasantly of horses and hay. Despite her penchant for dressing colorfully around the house, the face she presented to the outer world was always understated and polished.

“I’m thinking riding would be a good team-building activity for the firm. Don’t you? I mean, those extreme challenge, zip-line things are so passé. Laughable, really. But everyone getting outside on the trails, no matter if you know your way around a horse or not, would be a fun thing. Don’t you think?”

She didn’t wait for him to respond. “I’ll suggest it to the group on Monday. We’d go on work time, of course. Maybe do lunch and then riding. Or riding and lunch. Speaking of lunch, Debbie and I went for fish tacos at this little food truck everyone’s been talking about. It was amazing.”

She studied him for a minute. “You’re quiet.”

Jayden stared back. “You were talking non-stop.”

Tracey smirked. “And you could’ve jumped in anytime. That’s what makes a conversation. Really, though. Did you sleep okay?”

Jayden mumbled.

Tracey flipped him an evil look. “Did you just say, “Yes, mother?” She shot up off the couch. “My turn to make dinner. But no more *mother* cracks.”

After a quiet evening hanging out with Tracey, Jayden arose Sunday morning feeling better about everything. He went to the gym for a workout, finding it sparsely populated. He ended up spending two hours using free weights, the rowing machine, and even the blasted elliptical, pushing himself harder and harder.

The room started spinning. He dismounted the elliptical, squatted, and put his head between his knees. This was stupid. If he kept going, he might have a heart attack like his father did. The man had only been fifty-six, and Jayden was more than two decades younger. Still, what was he trying to do?

He spent the afternoon on the couch, throwing back Advil with beer and watching snowboarding in Chile of all things. Tracey was out having brunch somewhere, and who knows what else she’d be up to after that. Jayden was happy to mancave it and wait for Monday afternoon to arrive so he could go to work and find out what all that fuss with the file had been about.

* * *

Jayden stepped out of the scorching afternoon heat into the PHI Center’s sterile coolness. Sal was working security, all curly red hair and freckles against her blue uniform. She greeted him and added, “Hey, I could use your help later. The security system’s been acting up. Been freezing on us. We had to reboot several times today. It keeps going down.”

Jayden scanned through. He wanted to keep moving. “Rebooting is a temporary solution. I’ll take a look at it for you later.”

Sal tilted the brim of her cap back. “Thanks.” Then, as Jayden was heading across to the elevators, she called after him. “Hey, have a good day!”

Jayden bypassed the elevators and took the stairs one level down to tech central. The large open area was jammed with people. A small workgroup had spontaneously sprung up in the middle of the space. They’d pulled chairs, worktables, laptops and a four-foot monitor into a messy jumble, and were talking and gesturing intensely. Jayden knew all of them.

Ananda spied him first and waved his hand from the center of the chaos. “Jayden! Look everywhere. It’s the undertaker.”

This suspended the conversation, which made Tat frown. He always wanted to stay on task, and the slightest interruption irritated him. But Sarah smirked at Ananda's joke and waved. They were as mismatched as the by-the-books cop and the precinct's loose cannon in a buddy movie. Ananda was the straight man in his khakis and light blue shirt, while Sarah's brightly colored men's dress shirts revealed how ready she was to buck the system. They were working with Team Black today: Tat, Carlos, and Xiaoli. The three were visionaries, an actual job title here, which Jayden understood to include systems architecture, but they also oversaw lifestyle, which determined how Angela Spelling and the other Insiders experienced their world. Again there was a contrast. Carlos was easygoing, while Tat was as impatient as his pinched features suggested. Meanwhile, Xiaoli bucked the female tech image, a wisp of a woman in a chiffon mini dress over black leggings, and anchored by Doc Martens.

Jayden wasn't about to let Ananda's remark go unchallenged in front of the group. He put his hands on his hips and struck a hero's pose. "You got it wrong, my friend. I am the Granter of Eternal Life."

There were groans all around. Sarah threw a wadded up piece of paper that hit him in the shoulder. "Give it a rest, Wonder Boy," she jeered.

Jayden started edging around the group. He glanced over Xiaoli's shoulder at her screen. There was a column called Attributes, and Xiaoli was dragging and dropping blocks from there into a complicated matrix that looked like it was designed by spiders on ecstasy.

Xiaoli continued to work. "Do you like it? I'm experimenting with a new lifestyle matrix."

"Looks interesting. Well, I'll see you later, okay?"

Carlos made kissing noises, which made Jayden's cheeks grow warm. Tat made a face. "Move along. You're bothering us."

"You're just jealous," Xiaoli chided Tat, cheerfully batting her eyes.

"Don't tease him," Sarah said. "Tat will pass his recon apprenticeship before hell freezes over."

Xiaoli leaned toward her, and they slapped a high five while Tat frowned.

Carlos shrugged. "You have to respect Jayden, though. We wouldn't have any customers if it weren't for him."

Tat placed a hand over his heart. "I respect. Now move along, undertaker. We're busy." He looked significantly around at the group.

Ananda saluted. "Aye, team leader. We help you make new environments for the captives."

Tat wheeled on Ananda amid a chorus of oohs. "They are *not* captives."

"Take it easy, man," Carlos said. "It was a joke."

But Tat wouldn't back down. "The entities *need* structure." His voice was quiet, but his tone was full of venom.

Ananda stared back wordlessly.

Jayden sought to break the tension. "Fine. You're busy. I'm going. Just tell me. What have you done with Sharon? I need to see her."

Sarah was staring intently at her screen, pointedly ignoring the conflict, but she raised her hand and pointed. "Back there somewhere."

Ananda swiveled his chair away from Tat. "See you, geek," he mumbled.

Jayden stuck his tongue out at the back of Ananda's head, and Xiaoli smiled.

Carlos made his signature hand sign with pinky and thumb. "Hang loose, man."

* * *

He found Sharon scrolling through emails in the far corner. "Hey, boss."

Sharon removed her glasses. "I'm glad you stopped by before you went down." She gestured at her screen. "That was some good work you did Friday night. Way to troubleshoot an upload."

He shifted his weight. "Thanks. I suppose you already have a team on the file?"

Sharon's eyes narrowed. "Why would I do that?" She put her glasses back on and turned back to her emails. "Your work is excellent, Jayden. The Spelling folder is in tip-top shape."

"No, I mean—" he stopped himself. "You reviewed my entire log, right?"

She looked back at him and smiled. "A textbook recovery. You're the best." She winked. "Don't tell Claire I said so."

His mind was racing. “I was thinking I need to do some recon, make sure it’s all good Inside.”

Sharon turned back to her screen. “I don’t see how that’s necessary. You have three uploads scheduled. I’m giving Claire four. You put in a couple of hours overtime Friday, so I’ll kick you out early today.”

A *couple* of hours? Before Jayden could say anything more, they were interrupted.

“Speak of the devil.”

Jayden turned and looked down at Claire rolling into Sharon’s office, her red spike hair attempting to compensate for its owner’s need to live her life seated in a wheelchair, and not doing a bad of job it, either.

Claire lifted her chin and squinted up at him. “Did I hear I got more cases to do than Wonder Boy, here?”

Sharon kept busy at her screen. “He worked two and a half hours extra on Friday. I owe him an early night.”

Jayden stared at Sharon’s profile. He’d worked till morning. He was suddenly itching to get down in the deeps where he could be alone and take a look at Friday night’s log, himself. Not to mention what he’d left in quarantine, which Sharon evidently didn’t know about.

He almost forgot about Sal’s issue. “Oh, on my way in, security told me their system’s been freezing.”

Sharon rolled her eyes. “They need to fill out a trouble ticket.”

Jayden sighed at the tediousness of proper procedure. “Yeah, well, they told me about it. Can I just resolve it for them?”

Sharon reached up under her glasses and rubbed her eyes. “Sure. I’ll give Claire one more of your cases.”

Claire cursed and rolled her eyes.

“Sorry,” he murmured as he edged past her. He caught a look of puzzlement on her face at his uncharacteristic politeness, but he kept moving, ducking out of Sharon’s office and heading back up toward the elevators. He waved off Ananda and the rest of the mosh pit as they took another round of jabs at him. Once in the elevator, he pushed the button for the deeps, then let his face settle into a grim expression. It wasn’t Sal’s small problem that troubled him, but what was—or wasn’t—in his log.

* * *

It wasn’t there. It just wasn’t there. Nothing in the log about the ever-expanding file. Nothing about the hours he’d worked to extricate the mass from Angela Spelling and dump it in quarantine. The log was missing loads. It wasn’t that it had suddenly cut out, or that he’d inadvertently shut it off. Rather, the record had been wiped, from the moment he’d noticed the spike in CPU usage, to after he’d managed to get the file in quarantine. It documented Jayden’s resolve and repair on Angela Spelling’s file structure, and then how the nebula of her visual resolved into proper human form. It included their conversation. *You’re not dead, ma’am*. Everything having to do with the mystery file had been erased. The whole thing was surreal.

He cursed and reviewed it again, swearing all the more at how routine his voice sounded at the start. Damn him for wanting to downplay it all so he wouldn’t attract undue attention. Why did he insist on doing everything himself? He caught no discernible hop at the point where the log would’ve been edited. Whoever did this was skilled.

His hand became inexplicably clumsy as he punched up the quarantine folder, but he finally managed it on the third try. It was empty. Whatever he’d extricated from Angela Spelling’s folder was gone. Disappeared. Crap. He sat back in his chair and stared straight ahead. According to the system, all he’d done Friday night was a routine rescue. Okay, not exactly routine, but also not the unique emergency it had been.

The back of his neck prickled, and he swung around, so violently that he banged his shin on the desk leg. It was one Gig. Its cobalt blue eyes regarded him from within its silvery face.

“Procedure Room Four has been signaling ready repeatedly,” the robot announced.

“Sorry, Gig,” he replied, rubbing his sprouting bruise and wincing. “I got distracted. I’m on it.”

ANALOG

He swiveled back to his screens, and saw he had back-to-back uploads. He'd be out of here early. Unless. . .

He heaved a ragged sigh. If the Angela Spelling thing happened again, he would hit all the alarms, stat. He'd call Sharon at home on her cell, personally.

He reached for his neon green water jug. Empty.

"Hey, Gig?"

The silvery head glided into view. The robot assessed the scene with glassy eyes. "Would you like some water, Jayden?"

He was starting to feel sick. "Please."

As Gig rolled off with the jug, Jayden hugged his stomach. Paranoia was threatening to set in. He wasn't crazy, he told himself. Everything had really happened.

But who would go to all this trouble to erase the log? And what had they done with that file?

He should go to Sharon. "With what?"

"Excuse me?"

Christ, Gig had come back with his water already. "Never mind," he said. He took the jug, and thought how he could ask the robot a few questions about Friday night. But that would have to wait. He was neglecting Room Four.

He opened a screen onto the room and the waiting technician. "Yo, I'm here. Fu?"

It wasn't Fu. Jayden tried to remember the guy's name. "Sorry. Aiden, right?"

"Where were you, man? I've been waiting almost fifteen minutes. The patient's knocked out already."

"Rolling." Jayden checked the specs. The subject's name was Hoyle. "Folder ready. Go ahead."

He couldn't help it. Once a procedure was underway, there was no need for him to hang out, but he sat there staring at the status screen the whole time. His nervousness turned out to be for nothing. The upload went easily, files stacking in an orderly fashion within the new entity's folder.

Same with the second upload an hour later in Room Two. The technician was Aiden again. Where was Fu? He usually worked with her.

Gig rolled by the desk as Jayden was finishing checking the completed upload. "Would you like me to order takeout for you, Jayden?"

"Um, no, thanks. I'm heading out early tonight."

"Okay."

Jayden jumped into the pause. "Hey, Gig? Can you tell me when I left Friday? I'm trying to track my overtime."

"Certainly." Gig paused. "One A.M."

Not hardly. Had they reprogrammed Gig, too? "Thanks," he said.

As Gig rolled away, continuing his rounds, Jayden clutched for his version of reality. *I remember*, he told himself. He'd gone home and made himself a meal as Tracey was getting up.

Shoot, he had to shake this off and get back to work. He was out of cases for the day, but there was still the small matter of the security system freezing up. "Gig!"

"Yes?" The voice was right by his ear.

He wheeled around, cursing under his breath. If it had been a person, and not Gig, he would've thought it was lurking on him. That was the second time he'd startled. He had to get a grip.

"Gig, the security system has been seizing up. Can you run a diagnostic on the devices and look at system resources for any spikes, please?"

"I'm on it." The robot liked to demonstrate its grasp of slang by repeating phrases. It rolled away.

Jayden hailed Sal. "How's it going?"

Sal answered and sat back in her chair, smiling as she saw him on screen. "It's going."

"I'm starting to look at your issue," he said. "What can you tell me about it? I mean, does it tend to freeze when you open a program? Or try to run a particular device? A camera or something like that?"

Sal frowned, uncertain. Typical for an end user not to pay attention to these details. “Well, we pretty much monitor the cameras.”

“Are they on a cycle? Or manual?”

Sal was getting irritated. “If you come up, I’ll show you. Maybe we can get it to freeze again for you.”

“On my way.” Jayden locked his system and headed toward the elevator. “I’m going topside,” he called to Gig.

Up at Sal’s console, Jayden marveled at how old and clunky the security system was. The stationary cameras didn’t have half the functionality of the computer cams the techs used to communicate with each other, and it looked like no one had upgraded the system since they installed it. He’d have to speak to Sharon.

As Jayden acquainted himself with things, Sal kept up a friendly patter. “Isn’t it weird that you’re fixing this thing for us? Considering what you also do? It’s kind of freaky when you think about it, isn’t it? I mean, one minute you have a life in your hands, and the next minute, you’re working on the security system. Wow.”

Sal’s spiel was getting on his nerves. “Can you tell me what’s in this directory?”

Sal peered over his shoulder at the screen. “It looks like you’re in the area where we save off the video each day. We keep feeds for the past seven days.”

“Everything is labeled in a code,” he said. What kind of user-unfriendly system was this?

“Oh, you just have to know,” Sal said. “See, G is for ground floor, and the cameras are labeled from front of the building to the back. G1 through G3 are outside the front door, G4 is the security checkpoint here, and so on.”

Jayden clicked into the G4 folder. Each file was labeled with the camera identification code and date. Something worked at the back of his mind.

“Checkpoint is boring,” Sal said, reaching around him. “The procedure rooms on floor five are more interesting. See, they all start with code 5PR.”

As they watched the video—it looked like Aiden, busying himself with pre-op—Jayden’s first thought was whether Sal got her jollies watching instantiations when she was bored. Then he saw the **TIMESTAMP** in the upper right corner, and a second thought hit with gravity that seemed to weigh him down in the chair. Someone could’ve tampered with the log, but the security system—

The device in his pocket beeped. He drew it out and glanced at it. It was Gig. Reflexively, he hit decline and returned the device to his pocket. When he spoke to Sal, he kept his voice casual.

“I think you may be looking at a major upgrade,” he said. “Meanwhile, it might be best if I had access to the system at my desk, so I can monitor any new freezes and see where it’s coming from.”

“Sure thing,” Sal replied, grabbing the keyboard. “I’ll give you your own sign-in.”

Jayden blinked. Maybe Sal was more savvy around a computer than he’d given her credit for. “You can do that?”

Sal was busily typing. “Yup. I’m the captain. I add new users when they’re hired, and delete them when they’re fired.” She laughed. “Actually, no one’s been fired, but one did retire. Hey, that rhymes, too. Funny, isn’t it?”

He couldn’t help rolling his eyes but made sure he was standing behind her when he did so. “Thanks a bunch. Be seeing you.”

“No, thank *you*,” she said, kicking back in her chair again.

While he waited for the elevator to arrive, Jayden read the text message Gig had sent earlier, after he’d refused the voice call: *Performance issue resolved*. Well, he could honestly say later that he hadn’t received this till after Sal had granted him access. Plus, just because the issue was resolved for now, didn’t mean he should abandon the fact the whole system was in need of an upgrade. Legitimately, he should take a good look at it before speaking with Sharon.

As he stepped into the elevator, he noticed it was after nine already, close to his early quitting time. Not worth going to the deeps. Still, he didn’t want to return to the checkpoint right away,

so he punched the floor for the tech offices. He should drop by before he took off, he told himself. Maybe Sharon was working late.

Say it like you mean it, he told himself as he rode the elevator down. He knew everyone working days would be gone by now.

The doors slid open onto dim lighting. He stepped out and approached the empty mosh pit where Ananda, Sarah and Team Black had been working. As he stared at one of the darkened monitors, he thought how stupid this was. What was he going to do? Hack into some computers? Here's Wonder Boy, the super tech hero, punching keys and miraculously recovering the stolen mystery file. He cursed under his breath, and returned to the elevator.

He hit the button for the lobby. As the doors slid to close, a hand suddenly appeared in the gap. He jumped, but as the doors opened, Ananda's face appeared. His friend took one look at him and broke into a grin.

"Did I scare you?" He stepped into the elevator. "I scared you." The doors shut. The elevator started its short ride up.

Jayden covered his paranoia by swearing and managed a question. "What are you doing sneaking around?"

"Working," Ananda said, facing forward. "I got carried away. I didn't notice the time."

He looked sideways at Jayden. "What about you? Why are you sneaking around? This isn't even your floor."

Jayden shrugged to cover his discomfort. "I got distracted and punched the wrong floor."

Ananda snorted. "That's our Jayden, lost in the fog."

Relieved his lie was believable enough, he didn't have to feign good-natured outrage. "Hey, watch it now. It could happen to anybody." Ananda just laughed.

Sal was at her post as they went through security. "One early, one late. Again," she said, fixing Ananda with a stare. He waved her off.

As they stepped through the glass front doors, Jayden hesitated, then, feeling a bit awkward, said, "Hey, do you want to get a drink or something?"

But Ananda was already hurrying toward a blue minivan. "I can't. I'm late getting home." He raised his voice as the distance increased. "Kyra had to pick up the kid tonight and she is not happy about that, since I have the baby mobile."

His last words were shouted as he reached the minivan. He climbed in and started it up, then accelerated out of the gate. Jayden made his way toward his own car and drove straight home.

* * *

He arrived at the apartment to sounds from the television and the sight of Tracey busy in the kitchen wearing a short pink robe and slippers, and some kind of hat. "You're home early," she said, filling two margarita glasses from a small pitcher.

He headed to the refrigerator for a beer. "Remember? I worked late on Friday night. What's that on your head?"

"It's a turban. Rose Pink. Like it? You can turn it so the flower is on top like this, or on the side, or at the nape of the neck."

"It's lovely," he said as he popped the cap on the beer. "Do I smell popcorn?"

"You do. It's chick flick night. We're binge watching classic Reese Witherspoon."

He peeked into the living room. There was a blonde woman curled up on the couch, wearing a gray athleisure outfit and fuzzy orange slippers. "Hi, Jayden!" she called. She fumbled for the remote and paused the video.

"You remember Debbie, don't you? We go riding together."

Jayden wasn't sure he did. Debbie looked like a horse woman, long and slender, generally athletic. She wore her long hair in a loose braid that came forward over her left shoulder.

"Haven't seen you in a while," Debbie said, grabbing a handful of popcorn from a half-empty bowl.

Jayden smiled at her and turned away and lowered his voice. "Hey, Tracey?"

"Yes, you are welcome to join us." Tracey grabbed pot holders and peeked in the oven.

"No, that's not what I was going to ask," he said. "Saturday morning, when I came home. It

was after two, right?”

“Yes,” Tracey replied, shutting the oven door again. “I was getting up to go riding. It was more like seven or eight o’clock.”

“And I told you why I was late?”

Tracey edged past him, casting him a quizzical look. “Yes. You had trouble uploading someone. Angela something, was it?” She opened a cupboard and got out a cobalt blue plate.

Jayden pressed on. “And I mentioned a computer virus?”

Tracey paused at the counter. “What is this, an episode of *Law and Order*? Okay, you got me on that one. I don’t remember. What’s your point?”

“Nothing.” He waved it off. “Forget it.”

Tracey put her hands on her hips. “Look. You were upset about something at work, and I listened. I didn’t know there was going to be a test, or I would’ve taken notes.

“Here.” She thrust the plate into his hands. “Can you take the eggrolls out of the oven, please? And do feel free to join us.”

She picked up the drinks and rejoined Debbie in the living room.

Jayden opened the oven door. The eggrolls looked good. Wherever they were from, it wasn’t the frozen food section of the supermarket. Maybe he’d watch movies with them after all. Grilling Tracey wasn’t his style. He was losing it by doubting himself. And if he kept that up, whoever had changed things to look the way they did would have won.

* * *

The next afternoon, Jayden went through security with a determined stride—only dimly aware of Sal greeting him as he swiped through—and headed straight to the deeps. He’d figured out something important last night, after watching the last half of *Legally Blonde* and all of *Wild* with Tracey and Debbie. Whoever had taken the quarantined file and erased a chunk of the logs was waiting for him to come unhinged. They’d be expecting him to storm Sharon’s office to report a potentially harmful virus of unknown origin, and talking about conspiracies. The result? No one would believe him, and assuming Sharon didn’t suggest he take a little time off, whoever had done all this could continue their activities knowing that if Jayden kept reporting things, he’d be completely discredited. No one else knew about the quarantined file, not even Fu.

He’d decided to act like nothing had happened. This strategy came with an added advantage. He could check into things without everyone scrutinizing his behavior. Of course, it was likely whoever had moved the mystery file from quarantine—and he had no reason to believe anyone had deleted it because of its unusual properties—would be keeping an eye on his movements. Well then, let them confront him. At least he’d find out who was responsible.

He flipped open his combat-camo notebook, fired it up, and logged in. Sharon was hailing him. He opened the window and put the video up on monitor two.

Sharon’s expression was calm. “I thought you’d be down there already. Say, there are only three uploads tonight. We had a couple of cancellations.”

Jayden nodded. Sometimes the scheduled ones decided to postpone in order to attend family events, or simply to enjoy life on the Outside a bit longer. Sometimes those who wanted to do it naturally died before they could get here, which Jayden thought was a complete waste. He’d put out a public service announcement about that iffy choice if he could. “I’ll take them if Claire wants the night off,” he said.

Sharon sighed. “Funny. Claire said the same thing.”

Everyone needed their paycheck, of course. It was for these slow days that Jayden had offered to work in the deeps. “Okay. I can keep myself busy working with Gig and the servers if you want.”

“Sounds good,” she replied, then winked. “I’ll give Claire the cases. Thanks. Have a good night.”

Jayden sat back, not believing his luck. Sharon knew full well that he’d have some extra time on his hands, and she didn’t care how he spent it. Part of him wanted to get into the security system and go through the Friday night video. But given Sal had told him video was saved for seven days, that could wait. What he really needed to do was check up on Angela Spelling. And

now he didn't even have to beg or make up some kind of excuse to do it. All he had to do was wait till the tech floor cleared out for the day and then go in. Doing recon wasn't exactly on the server maintenance list, but if anyone asked him about it later, he could cobble together a pretty good reason, and Sharon would back him up.

* * *

Only Insiders were visible to each other in the virtual environment. The company had technical reasons why Jayden or anyone else couldn't just mock up a standard avatar and join the party. Those technical reasons fell under the heading of *lifestyle*, an undoubtedly patent-pending set of protocols that ensured the Insiders remained well-adjusted members of their society. The company needed people who could go in and observe that culture, to ensure everything was copacetic. But they didn't want to potentially upset the natives by introducing individuals who could pop in and out at will. Hence, the employees assigned to recon operated virtual avatars with the power of invisibility.

He had Gig go fetch him one of the five VR outfits while he flipped through frames of information on monitor three. Today's population was 6,790, and they were averaging five new uploads a day during the normal Monday through Friday work week, plus the occasional weekend or holiday emergency for those who insisted on the near-death transfer. At this snail's pace, it would take a decade to get up to ten thousand entities, but aggressive promotion was focusing on more than doubling the current upload rate. Jayden estimated if all five transfer rooms were in use at once, they could handle fifty uploads a day, easy.

Meanwhile, they had several thousand early adapters to keep tabs on, moving around in a virtual area that mimicked a small town, surrounded on three sides by a large park, and an oceanfront on the remaining side, with a beach. All the spaces were social gathering points. If an Insider wanted solitude, they could retreat to their personal folder, and create their own private space. Currently, fewer than one hundred entities were ensconced in their folders, and most had been there only a few minutes, which was a good sign. Long stays in one's folder were a symptom of adjustment problems, and required intervention.

He noticed Angela Spelling was currently in her folder, and had been there for an hour. That was a long time for an entity. He decided not to go straight to her, in case he was being monitored by whoever took the mystery file. But a good reconnaissance covered all the territory. He'd check up on her last.

Gig returned with the VR outfit, which always reminded Jayden of football gear. There was a helmet that covered the entire face and contained no eye holes or other means of viewing one's physical surroundings. The helmet always came last. First on were shoulder pads that were connected by cable to elbow, wrist and finger pads. Then the "pants" that were a similar series of cabled pads for the hips, knees, ankles and toes. Once Jayden had these on, he allowed Gig to attach the tethers. Just as the "outfit" wasn't in fact clothing, the tethers were not cables that attached to walls or the floor, but a flexible wraparound system that translated impulses for physical movement into signals to move Jayden's virtual form, and kept him from flailing about, endangering himself or others.

Not everyone had the skill and temperament to do recon Inside. Not only was he invisible, but the protocol that prevented entities from walking through virtual walls, as well as each other, was absent. To be a ghost was fun and unsettling all at once. Normally the task was within the purview of Team Black, but of the three, only Xiaoli was certified. Tat was still at apprenticeship level and needed to be accompanied, which irritated him no end. Carlos tried several times but became disoriented and nauseous after a few minutes, so it was doubtful he would ever certify—a prospect he didn't seem to mind. The search for people who could handle it had led to mandatory trials. Along with Xiaoli and Jayden, only Fu-Hau had reached full certification.

He flashed Gig a thumbs-up. "Bring on the hood, buddy."

Gig approached with the helmet, glassy cobalt eyes regarding him in a way that made Jayden wonder what it was thinking. That was ridiculous, of course. The robot was only making sure the helmet was correctly aligned over Jayden's head as it lowered the gear into place. Jayden felt Gig's silicone-covered fingers brush against his neck as it attached the helmet to the shoulder

pads. He slowed his breathing so his face wouldn't overheat.

He waited till the green light flashed in the lower left corner of his vision. "Good to go, Gig," he said. "Blast off."

As always, he felt a sensation of rapid forward movement, and then a new world burst forth from a pinpoint of light and engulfed him.

* * *

To view Inside from the interface was to see the illusion of their world. He saw three-dimensional representations of ordinary objects, but the shapes were more like blueprints or sketches. When he looked into the sky, he saw through the clouds and even the sun, to the edges of the programmable virtual space, a thin, shimmering metallic horizon. He couldn't move any objects due to the protocol, and Insiders walked through him, completely unaware of his presence.

He could see into entities as easily as he could see through walls. He could dial in on a single entity's thoughts and emotional state, or dial out to folder view, where he could see the directory structure.

Witnessing the artificial nature of this world, and seeing those living within it in this way, were the things most of his colleagues found so unbearable they couldn't focus on tasks. Xiaoli, however, summed, or conducted quality observations. It took a certain perspective. Xiaoli summed up Jayden's own philosophy on the matter beautifully. *We don't question the authenticity of reality, but what if our five human senses are really an interface that's been programmed, like theirs?*

The system performed its own monitoring functions, but it was no substitute for doing recon Inside. Human behavior—and entities were undoubtedly still human—was still best understood by their own kind. Rule One: If something looks wrong, it is wrong, and needs to be reported. Rule Two: If you notice something you haven't seen before, report it, no matter how minor it seems. Team Black was always interested in lifestyle observations, and while Jayden's current foray wasn't authorized, he knew they'd be interested in his report.

He began on the street level, a bustling scene that could have been a quaint neighborhood within a large metropolis. Here there were bistros and bars, boutiques and pocket parks with sculptures peeking from amid the trees. Insiders bustled by singly and in groups. Many were in high spirits. He overheard jokes and good-natured teasing. A few walked with frowns on their faces, however. He dialed in to these entities one at a time, and found loneliness, frustration, jealousy, and even anger. In short, the same emotions one would find in a crosssection of embodied people. This wasn't a place of ersatz bliss. Constant paradise didn't suit Insiders, so Team Black had fixed that aspect of lifestyle some time back. Jayden wouldn't bother to put this in his report.

He passed by the gathering places Team Black had created. The parks were filled with people playing games or lounging. The bars were bustling, and the sounds of loud talk and laughter spilled out onto the street. Jayden smiled as he passed by. Entities loved to gather and tell their life stories.

He rounded a corner and walked by the university building, a two-story affair that stretched the length of the block. It was empty as usual, but he checked it out, anyway, to be thorough. He stayed on the street and looked through the walls at the deserted classroom spaces and wondered why Team Black left it standing. Insiders didn't even come here; the whole block was devoid of life. Jayden considered it a waste of virtual space.

He reached the end of the block and encountered two entities greeting each other on the corner. "Have you seen Angela Spelling?" one asked.

Jayden stopped to listen. The entity who'd asked was known as Cartesian, who'd become something of a sensation after he'd changed his name, announcing he was redefining himself. Now everyone was inviting him to events. Cartesian always wore a white lab coat, which Jayden assumed was a holdover from his life as a scientist of some kind. The majority of the instantiated had been in STEM careers.

Cartesian was speaking to someone Jayden was unfamiliar with. Someone named Didion, he saw in the information bar that scrolled to one side of his vision. "No, not in the longest time,"

Didion responded. "Everyone's been looking for her."

Cartesian stroked his chin thoughtfully. "Still off by herself, then."

Didion looked worried. "I hope there's nothing wrong with her. I invited her to the big party tonight."

Day and night were relative terms Inside.

Cartesian made a dismissive gesture. "If there's an issue, she'll get fixed up." His expression suddenly switched, and he grinned. "Message me if she shows up, okay?"

"Absolutely," Didion said. His concern had evaporated as well. "She is without doubt the most intriguing person, isn't she?"

Cartesian agreed heartily, and the two parted.

These sudden shifts in emotion were common for Insiders. It was another feature that unnerved people trying to qualify for recon, but Jayden chalked it up to the faster processing speeds. However, the subject matter made him all the more anxious to check in on Angela, and anyone who reviewed his log later would agree.

Thinking of logs gave him that creeping paranoia again. He touched the control on his left shoulder pad to dial out to folder view.

Coffins. That's how most people reacted when they saw folder view for the first time, and it was a basis for the undertaker joke. Thousands of three-dimensional rectangles filled the landscape beneath him. He did a quick search in the information bar and guided himself to Angela Spelling's folder. Once there, he entered the master code that let him inside, easy as a maid's hotel key. Crossing the threshold, he found himself in Angela Spelling's private world.

She'd designed her personal space as a library, with a green upholstered chair next to a side table and reading lamp in the center of radiating shelves of books. He found her sitting in the chair with her legs tucked up to one side, turning the pages of a book with a deeper green cover than the chair. Watching her read, he realized there was a plausible explanation for her absence from the streets. She was immersing herself in something familiar. Angela had been a librarian. That she had all the time to read now, and at an unprecedented pace, without tiring, must be heaven to her.

Jayden scrolled through the information bar, viewing her stored experiences since uploading. She'd initially traveled, which wasn't unusual. New Insiders often made a full circuit of the virtual space to understand their boundaries. Angela had spent time at the beach, reading from a virtual prop of a book, as she was here. She'd then attended a few social events, before retreating to her folder. Why?

Jayden looked toward her portal, her interface with Inside, and found it jammed with invitations. There were hundreds and they were still coming in. She was deluged with requests from the people she'd met at the mixers, and from their friends and contacts as well.

To see Angela spending so much time reading quietly didn't synch with the evidence of her popularity. Didion had called her intriguing. Jayden stood staring from his place among the bookshelves, trying to resolve the contradiction.

She looked up from her book and gazed around her, furrowing her brow. She hopped to her feet and walked away, along one of the aisles lined with bookshelves.

"Hello?" Her voice was uncertain, even a little afraid.

Then she snorted. "Silly. No one can come into your personal folder."

The back of Jayden's neck tingled. He watched her return to her chair, but she didn't sit down. Instead she looked around her space, slowly, her gaze lingering on where he stood. He realized he was holding his breath and exhaled.

"I know you're there," she said calmly.

He gasped.

"I can see you, kind of. You look like a ghost."

Jayden didn't know what to do. No entity had even suspected his presence, before this. "I'm not hiding," he said. Well, it was the truth.

She took several steps toward him, frowning. "Whoever you are, you aren't supposed to be here."

"It's okay," he said. "I'm just checking up on you." He hesitated. "You're spending a lot of time reading."

She didn't seem to hear him. Of course she couldn't hear him; the interface wasn't built for that. But she could see him, and she stared. "I remember you," she said. "You're the young man who took over when that Asian gal had to go."

He nodded.

She smiled with satisfaction. "Well, I'm not surprised you're here. I seem to have misplaced something. I can't remember what, though, and it's driving me mad."

She raised her voice on the last phrase. She let out a frustrated growl and stomped back to her chair. She picked up her book and looked at its cover, then opened it and flipped through the pages. Had she forgotten he was there?

Evidently she had. She also seemed to have let go of her anger. She sat back down in her chair, tucked her knees up and to the side once again, and continued reading.

Jayden watched her for a while, not daring to move. Then, growing more and more uncomfortable with holding still, he hit the end recon button on his left shoulder.

* * *

He started to unsnap his helmet, but Gig's articulated fingers were already there to assist. A trickle of sweat ran down Jayden's right temple, tickling. Once his fingers were freed, he ran a hand through his hair and found it damp. Dang, that helmet could hold the heat.

"Thanks, Gig."

"May I order supper for you?" the robot asked as it lifted the gear off his shoulders. "Chinese food again?"

He waved the robot off. "Not right now, okay?"

He sat down to remove the gear from his legs, but he was shaking so hard Gig had to help him. Once he was free of it all, the robot scooped everything up and whisked away to the storage closet, leaving Jayden to try and make sense of what had happened. The answer was in that missing mystery file he'd quarantined. Even though he'd been careful, he must have left pieces of its programming behind, stuck in Angela Spelling's folder, and attached to her virtual being. It seemed, given her popularity, that other Insiders may have picked up on it somehow. Maybe that's why they found her so intriguing.

The swirl of her uncoalesced image—that nebula—floated up from memory and with it a shred of that whale song sound mix. He shuddered. And now she was holed up in her folder. They had to do something for her.

* * *

As he left the building at the end of his shift, walking across the parking lot to his car, he wondered if his recon log was about to be doctored, too. The thought gave him a metallic taste in his mouth. Surely whoever was responsible for this would want to fix her. But if they didn't, he would.

He arrived home to find Tracey had fallen asleep on the couch. Odd that the television wasn't even on. He debated waking her, and decided against it, padding quietly down the hall to his bedroom. By the time he got up the next day she was off to work at the financial firm. Jayden wanted to barge into work first thing, to take care of Angela, but if his recon log had been cut like the log on Friday night, he'd lose credibility fast. So instead he worked off his frustration at the gym. Then it was into his black Camaro for the drive to the PHI Center.

He received a text as he was pulling on one of the glass doors of the Center. Stepping inside, he looked at his phone. It was from Sharon. *Report to conference room immediately.*

Finally, a meeting about Angela. What else could it be?

"Wonder Boy!"

Jayden turned and saw Claire rolling up behind him through the double glass doors, the bright afternoon sun shining through her red spikes of hair. She grinned. "Ready to ferry some souls to the other side, fellow undertaker?"

Over Claire's head, Jayden saw another figure approaching. It was Fu. "Um, actually, I have a meeting."

Claire spun her electric chair in a one-eighty and then faced forward again and winked at Jayden as she rolled through the checkpoint. "Well, make it quick. I'm not taking all your cases again tonight."

Something inside fluttered as Fu approached. She greeted him with a soft smile.

"I haven't seen you in a while," he began.

Her eyes seemed to signal a warning. Was he imagining it? He tone was casual as she said, "There's been a lot going on. How are you?"

Jayden was aware of Sal checking them out with a sideways look. "I'm okay. I . . . I have to go down to the conference room. Some meeting. Are you going, too?"

She shook her head and proceeded through the security checkpoint. "I'm on a different project, I guess. What's the meeting about?"

"Hopefully the recon I did last night," he replied, swiping through. He followed Fu to the elevators, trying to gauge if he should tell her about Angela.

Fu waited till they were at the elevators and said, "Well, be careful." She blushed. "I mean, take care." She pressed the up button, for the procedure rooms.

Jayden pressed for down, to the tech floor and the conference room. They stood in awkward silence till one of the doors dinged. It was for up. Fu got in. As the doors closed, she fixed him with a look that was clearly one of warning.

Tech central was running in high gear as Jayden stepped out of the elevator. He turned left, then took another left at the restrooms, and peered through the open door of the formal conference room. He'd been here only a couple of times, to give presentations to management. This afternoon it was Team Black and a willowy middle-aged woman with graying hair, reading glasses suspended on a chain over her gray blouse. They all sat on the side of the table facing the door. Carlos was relaxed as ever, but Xiaoli didn't crack a smile, and Tat openly glowered at him.

"Hi Jayden." Xiaoli stretched out an arm, a pink chiffon sleeve fluttering with the movement. "This is our supervisor, Mrs. Harriet McBride."

Harriet McBride was one of the vice presidents of the company. Jayden had no idea Team Black reported directly to her. Yet it made sense, given they designed every aspect of life Inside, that they'd be supervised at the highest level.

"Thanks for joining us," Mrs. McBride said smoothly. "Please shut the door."

The room seemed to shrink as he did so. There were no windows, only soft, indirect executive lighting coming from around the bevels in the wall panels. The room smelled of leather and furniture polish. As Jayden took a seat with his back to the door, he almost expected a bright light to pop on, blinding him. But that didn't happen.

Carlos leaned back in his chair and put his feet on the table. He'd kicked off his flip-flops. Somehow the incongruity of his exposed bare feet added tension to the room. "Your recon log is interesting to say the least."

He nodded, stealing a glimpse at Mrs. McBride, who seemed unfazed by Carlos' bare feet on the table. Jayden's face grew hot as the silence lengthened. There wasn't even a water pitcher and glasses. A new awareness crept out of his subconscious like a vine, touching him with a thin tendril. At Harriet McBride's level, things like doctored logs and missing files could happen.

Tat leaned forward and clasped his hands on the table. "You weren't asked to do recon. Why did you go Inside?"

He cleared his throat. He could really use some water. "I thought I should check it out. There had been an issue with Angela Spelling on Friday, when we uploaded her. I had some time on a slow night. So . . ."

He looked at Mrs. McBride, who sat immobile, watching him with suppressed emotion. He suddenly thought of Ananda, crossing his arms against his chest and staring down Tat. He felt himself at the epicenter of a power struggle, with no one on his side.

Xiaoli sat almost preternaturally straight. "And what did you think of what you found?"

There it was, and no point lobbing accusations. If this was the moment where they'd planned on breaking him, they were wrong. He lifted his chin and said, "Maybe you should tell me instead. What you thought of it. Didn't you see my log?"

Silence descended, but this time Jayden was ready to sit there all night, mad thirst or no. If he'd meant had they viewed the recon report, he would have used different words. Seeing the log was a phrase that better described Friday night's recording, when he'd cut the mystery file from Angela.

Xiaoli broke the silence. Her tone was her usual friendly self. "Tell me, Jayden. Why do you think Angela Spelling is attracting so many invitations?"

Tat chimed in. "A little unusual for a new Insider, don't you think?"

Did they know, or not? He shrugged, hoping he looked casual, but keeping his gaze averted from Mrs. McBride. She unnerved him. "Maybe the problem Angela had at upload left a kind of residual . . . marker . . . that some of the entities find intriguing."

Xiaoli smiled at that. "Like Cartesian changing his name. Do you have any thoughts about that? About Cartesian?"

Tat was scowling again. He looked over at Xiaoli, who ignored him as she waited for Jayden's response.

Were the two things related? Had they tried something before, with Cartesian? What kind of experiments were they doing? The version upgrades. His stomach lurched as he saw the big picture in a way he hadn't before. Of course lifestyle was about improving the experience Inside, but these were *people* they were working with. And their power over them was absolute.

Carlos jumped in. "Are you getting this? We're feeling you out because you'd make a great addition to Team Black. We could use you on our side."

Their side? Was there another side? He looked at Tat, who was clearly unhappy. No, not just unhappy. Jealous. Of his recon skills, and perhaps also of Xiaoli's praise.

He found it easiest to focus on Xiaoli as he spoke. "I'm honored that you're considering me for your team. But I'm confused. I don't know what's going on."

Xiaoli clasped her hands on the table top, matching Tat's posture. "Lifestyle is key to maintaining the optimal environment and experience set for those who are in our charge. What your recon has uncovered might be a destabilizing element. Given your skills, any thoughts you may have about it would be much appreciated. If you were to join our team, we could work together on this full-time."

Tat leaned forward. "Have you been asked to join any special projects? Related to the case of Angela Spelling?"

"No," he replied. His view of the situation did an abrupt flip. Maybe it wasn't Team Black who were experimenting with Angela, with Cartesian, in this way, but a faction within the company. Again, he was reminded of the standoff between Ananda and Tat. Ananda had joked the Insiders were captives. Joke, but no joke.

Jayden looked at them all. If there was an opportunity to spill his guts about Friday night, about the doctored log, this would be it.

Be careful, Fu had told him, before she'd corrected herself.

"I don't know what you're talking about," he said.

Mrs. McBride spoke up. "The danger of unsupervised machine learning is that the entities would be subsumed in the process. Would you consign the fate of over six thousand minds to be used as material in a process beyond our control?"

Jayden stared. The question left no doubt in his mind that whatever had happened to Angela was not Team Black's doing. But before he could respond, his cell phone played the signature riff from Sheryl Crow's *If It Makes You Happy*. Tracey never called him at work. He frowned.

Carlos rescued him. "Man, go ahead and take that if you have to." He made his hang loose sign as Jayden rose and went into the hall.

The hallway felt like a freezer after the conference room. He walked a few paces away from the door for privacy, and answered the ring. "Hello?"

It was Tracey. "Can you meet me for supper? On your break? I need to talk to you."

Jayden was so surprised by Tracey's uncharacteristic demand that he agreed at once. Tracey gave him the name of a steakhouse about a ten minute drive from the PHI Center.

He reentered the room to find Team Black in a spirited conversation as Harriet McBride

looked on calmly.

"I say yes!" Xiaoli was shouting.

"But can we trust . . ." Tat's gaze swiveled to the door, and the conversation ceased. Carlos leaned back and stared up at the ceiling while Xiaoli's eyes dropped to the tabletop in front of her. Tat stared straight ahead, as if Jayden didn't exist.

Mrs. McBride looked at the team and then turned to Jayden. She put on a courteous, professional smile, as impersonal as the room's decor. "I think we're done here for now. Thanks for stopping in. We'll get back to you soon."

Xiaoli had been pulling for him to join Team Black, but higher forces wanted him at a distance, at least for now. Fine. Maybe they were right. He wasn't exactly forthcoming with information. "Ma'am," he said in that formal way Texas men could talk. He didn't need a hat to tilt. His tone said it all.

* * *

Jayden got a meal break like everyone else, but he hardly ever left the building. Considering the strange meeting, though, he welcomed the opportunity to leave the facility. Too, the way Tracey had sounded on the phone . . . that's what had really brought him out. In the back of his mind, he wondered if Tracey was tricking him into socializing. Maybe he'd arrive to find himself at a table with the two of them and Debbie. Tracey had not sounded like her regular outgoing self, though, and that made Jayden worry.

The hostess ushered him to a table for two in the middle of the bustling steakhouse. Tracey was wearing a tailored navy blue dress and pearls. Jayden sat.

Tracey looked up from her menu. "Isn't it nice to get away from your desk for a while? The food here is great. You should have one of the steaks."

Jayden cast Tracey a wary look, still trying to figure out why she'd invited him out. He glanced at the menu to find fully half of it was devoted to an explanation of the various cuts of meat, and the options for sauces or rubs. Jayden disliked wordy menus. He set it down.

The waiter was a young man who seemed to take an interest in Tracey. They chatted amiably, and Tracey ordered a cup of lobster bisque and a Caesar salad.

The waiter turned to him. "And what would you like?"

Jayden handed him his closed menu. "I'll have the steak, with a potato."

The waiter blinked, then looked at Tracey, who smoothly ordered Jayden a ribeye, medium rare, with chimichurri sauce and garlic mashed potatoes. "You'll love it," she assured Jayden.

"Are you a regular here?" he asked, watching the waiter's back as he whisked through the dining room.

"It's my fave place to take business clients," she replied, then grinned. "Really, ordering a steak and potato. That's hilarious."

"You're welcome." The light banter made him feel more at ease.

Tracey kept up a monologue while they waited for their entrees to arrive. It was fun having him at girls' movie night last Monday. Debbie was so nice, didn't he think? Did Jayden want to come riding with them this Saturday? Jayden responded with a cool shrug that meant maybe.

As the waiter was serving their meals, Tracey said, "I waited up for you last night."

At first he thought Tracey was speaking to the waiter, but her eyes were boring into him. "And I came home," he said. He watched the waiter breeze away. "You fell asleep on the couch. I wasn't sure I should wake you."

Tracey stabbed a fork into her salad. "Hence dinner. But let's eat some of this delicious food first, okay?"

Jayden was happy to oblige. The steak was excellent, and the chimichurri sauce had been a good call. He found himself confiding in her, describing last night's recon mission in detail, including the part about Angela Spelling seeing him in her folder. "She actually sensed my presence," he said. "It was weird."

Tracey put her elbows on the table and rested her chin on the backs of her hands. "Do tell."

Jayden took another bite of steak. "That's just it. Insiders don't see us because we have invisible avatars. But Angela sensed I was there."

“Mm-hmm.”

Jayden glanced up. Tracey hadn't moved, but the way she was looking at him indicated he was about to find out why she'd invited him out to dinner. Might as well get it over with. “What?”

She looked a little tired. “See, I give advice for a living, so listen up. I've noticed you more withdrawn and preoccupied than usual. I am frankly concerned.” She held up a finger to stop his protest. “Girls movie night aside. I'm glad you spent time with Debbie and me. But let's face it. Watching a movie doesn't involve a lot of social interaction.

“Your whole job, Jayden, is centered around saving people. I get it that as soon as I come down with anything more serious than a cold, you're going to rush me to the PHI Center and upload my butt. Why do you think mother moved to Wisconsin after our father died? You kept bringing up that people who waited till near-death before uploading were gambling with their lives. You said disturbing things like, ‘scheduled never messes up.’ Honestly, I could've cast you in a horror movie as the creepster who snatches people off the streets and forces them to upload.”

Jayden swallowed a bite of mashed potatoes and rolled his eyes. “This is supposed to be advice?”

Tracey was unmoved. “You bet it's coming, and here it is. Stop punishing yourself for Alisa's death.”

His face was suddenly hot. “Huh? I—I'm not. . . .”

Tracey raised an eyebrow. “Yes, you are. This case you're obsessed about. Angela and Alisa. The names sound pretty similar. Know what I'm saying?”

Jayden stared.

Tracey sighed. “I love you, my brother. But at some point, you have to get on with your life. Working the late shift, doing what you do. . . .” She placed both hands on the table, palms down. “The part about uploading people I can understand. Each one saves someone, and you couldn't save Alisa. But you continue to punish yourself. It doesn't mean you must drag that weight through your life. You weren't responsible.”

Jayden stared at Tracey's hands, but it was a memory that riveted his attention. It may as well have been yesterday as three years ago. He was sitting at the wheel of his Camaro, watching his twin say goodbye as she opened the passenger door. *Thanks for the lift*, Alisa said as she stepped out. Then he'd been seized with inexplicable panic. He'd tried to reach for Alisa, but the door closed. He'd shouted at her, and she'd turned back, looking through the window at him, brow furrowing in confusion. They'd stared at each other, and then in slow motion, he'd watched both her arms fling out, like the wings of an angel about to fly. Her mouth and eyes had opened wide, and she'd shouted back, “What!?”

He'd had nothing logical to say in response. Her lips drew into a mocking smile, but before she'd disappeared into the crowd, she'd glanced back at him, as if she'd known what was going to happen at the rally that afternoon.

Tracey was still talking to him, but his mind was flipping through snippets of other scenes. Debbie—who was tall like Alisa—smiling down at him from the couch as they watched *Legally Blonde* of all things. The chaotic camaraderie of the tech floor at work. Ananda declining an invitation to drinks because he had to get back to his wife and kid. Himself working in the deeps, alone, with only Gig to keep him company. Angela Spelling's smile last Friday, as she finally coalesced into something comprehensible.

The hairs on the back of his neck rose. Like with Alisa, he'd denied what his inner senses knew about Angela Spelling. He'd cut away something that was a part of her being. Something precious, something important. Where was that file? He'd moved it into quarantine and then left. It had been raining. His car had been at the far end of the near-empty parking lot.

The top of Jayden's head tingled and seemed to pull him to his feet. He'd been confused about it being Saturday morning, because there had been other cars in the parking lot. He'd assumed early birds were starting to arrive at work. But . . .

“That's it,” he said. He was standing next to the table.

Tracey narrowed her eyes. “Have you been listening?”

“No.” He had to get back to work. Now. To see who besides him had a car in the lot Saturday morning. “I mean, yes.”

Tracey grabbed his hand and fixed him with a look that was suddenly exactly like their mother’s in that private moment at the hospital after the doctor had pronounced his twin dead on arrival. Jayden had been babbling, trying to tell his mother that he’d heard the gunshots before they happened, and she’d grabbed his hand and given him a look exactly like Tracey’s now. The look was pissed off and compassionate all at once. It communicated *I don’t understand your nonsense, but we’ll always be family*.

He placed his other hand over Tracey’s. Just like he’d done with entities floundering on upload, his sister was throwing him the life line of human connection. And what had he always said about that? Some people have to be saved from their own interior selves. Focus them outward, and they always improve. “I mean, I get you, Trace. Thanks.”

He bent down and kissed her firmly on the cheek. “But right now I have to go take care of something.” He released her hand.

Tracey raised a bemused hand to that cheek. “Okay. See you later, then. Don’t worry, I’ll get the check.”

* * *

As Jayden entered the building, he made his stride relax, conscious of the security cameras, in case someone looking later might otherwise notice his urgency. He strolled to the elevators and punched the button for the deeps.

He shifted his weight from foot to foot as the elevator descended. He’d meant to check out the video footage well before this, and now there was something additional to look up: those extra cars in the lot. Assuming everything was still there—untampered with—he might get to the bottom of what Team Black was worked up about. And who was responsible.

As soon as the elevator doors opened onto the deeps, he jogged to his workstation. Finally, this was his chance to look at the video feeds and confirm his version of reality. His hands were steady with purpose as he pulled up the security module, punched in his access code, and selected the archives icon. It was tempting to go straight to the parking lot cameras, but he decided to be methodical about this. First, he needed confirmation on when he’d left.

He pulled up the video for G4, the security checkpoint camera. He punched up the date, set it to start the replay at midnight, and selected the fast-forward function for a ratio of one frame in every sixty-four. That should reveal any movement without the need to slog through in real time. He directed the video output to monitor one and sat back to watch, grabbing his neon green jug from the edge of the desktop. As he observed the empty checkpoint frames, he took periodic swigs of water and hoped to all the gods that whoever faked up the logs—and Gig’s memory—had either overlooked the security cameras, or not had the access.

The minutes crawled as he sat staring at the empty checkpoint. At least it didn’t show him leaving the building anywhere near one A.M., but he waited till well past two before he declared victory. No one had come through the checkpoint and across the screen. A calm descended over him. Here was his version of reality.

He sped up the video and then slowed it again as it approached five o’clock. There it was, a blip of a figure. He tapped to freeze frame, went back thirty seconds, and then forward at normal speed and watched himself pass through the checkpoint at five minutes before six. He froze the frame again and stared at his haggard face, remembering how shook up he’d been. More than shocked. Tracey was right. That morning, his past had surfaced like a ghost to haunt him. He hit play and watched himself walk out of the frame.

One might surmise that was exactly the goal of the faction working against Team Black’s lifestyle management. The mysterious *other side*. When you upload people, how do you preserve essential parts of them that you can’t put into words?

A movement on the monitor got his attention and pulled him out of his head. The video had been advancing at normal speed. Jayden hit pause, directed the video back a few seconds, and then forward again.

Another figure was passing through the checkpoint on his way out the door. The clock in the upper right corner read 6:15 A.M. Jayden froze the frame and stared at the back of a man's head. He ran the video back again, then forward at half-speed and watched the figure pass by. The man's head remained averted to the camera. All Jayden could tell was he had black hair. He stared at the way the man twisted his neck, the position unnatural, and could only conclude that it was on purpose, to keep his face from being recorded.

He leaned back and studied the screen. It was no use to will the figure to show his face. The man was carrying a computer bag slung over his shoulder, and this caught Jayden's attention. There'd been no security guard at the checkpoint. Now here was someone taking something out of the building, and no one was there to search the bag. Not that a guard would do a complete search of the files on a computer. Not unless they'd been alerted about it. Still, to just walk out the door with something, get in your car, and drive away . . .

"Parking lot," he blurted. Not only would it show him the cars he'd wanted to see, but maybe the figure's face as well. Jayden brought up the list of cameras and selected G1 through G3, selected the date and time for each—what a tedious module—and arranged the video output into an array on monitor two.

The figure he wanted to see appeared in camera G3—the one above the front door, aimed downward—walked off-camera, and reemerged in G2, which seemed to be mounted on a light post near where the walkway ended at the parking lot. Jayden cursed as the figure kept his head turned sharply to the left, away from the light and the camera, then disappeared out of that frame. G1 was a wide-angle view of the dark parking lot, but at least it appeared to have night vision capabilities.

There were only two cars visible—a minivan, and Jayden's black Camaro, which rendered as a mere shadow far back in the lot.

The man entered from the left, a tiny figure in this view. Jayden swore again as he peered at the guy, rendered in ghostly white and half-green. The figure got into a minivan, turning toward the camera as he climbed in.

Jayden stabbed at the keyboard, freezing the frame and zooming in. The image was grainy at this level of magnification, but he could see the man's face. Jayden had seen a show once about how the human brain can recognize a face in fewer than one hundred milliseconds, and once the connection is made, there is no doubt. Similarly, he had no doubt the person exiting the building that morning was Ananda.

He sat back in his chair, staring at the evidence on the monitor, and shook his head. Before that meeting with Team Black and Mrs. McBride, he would've expected Tat, or even Carlos, to have been responsible for what had happened to Angela Spelling. But Ananda?

He let it sink in. Ananda was a programmer. He could've tried something out on Angela. Something that had backfired. And here was the evidence.

He took a swig from his jug to steady himself and leaned back and went to work. He had to open his own log of that night to remind himself which room Fu and Angela Spelling had been in. It was procedure room one, or 5PR1 if he'd understood Sal's codes correctly. He pulled up the directory and found the room, date, and time. He directed the feed to monitor three.

If Ananda had tampered with the program, it was likely he physically entered procedure room one to do so. Jayden started the video way back, in the midafternoon, and fast forwarded at one frame in seventy. Empty. Empty. Empty. It was tedious going. As he watched, Jayden thought of how to improve on the security system. Activate the video cameras based on motion detectors, so no one would have to look at all this nothing, and when a camera did turn on, security staff would be more likely to look to see what was happening.

Even running the video in faster than real time, it was a glacial pace. Suddenly, Jayden cursed and slapped his forehead. He wasn't looking for a blip at a security checkpoint, but someone entering the room to do something. Once they were in the room, there would be tons of frames tracking their presence. Jayden decided to sample one frame every ten minutes. That worked out to forty-two frames over a seven-hour period. If Ananda entered procedure room one, he should be visible on one of those forty-two frames.

Except he wasn't. Jayden ran out another set of forty-two frames staggered from the first set by five minutes. Nothing again. The room was empty up until the point Fu entered, to prepare for Angela Spelling's upload.

Jayden let out a sigh and hit play. Fu entered the room. Her movements, like her personality, were unpretentious and intelligent. As he watched her make the preparations, Jayden realized how much he'd missed her. Seeing her today, even briefly, awkwardly, had been welcome.

On the screen, the door to the procedure room opened, and orderlies wheeled in Angela Spelling. Having seen Angela Inside, he was repulsed by the sight of her here. The old woman's gray hair was thinned to the point of near-baldness. Her dark eyes were sunken back into their sockets, and her bottom lip was so deeply cracked it had become one large sore. The orderlies wheeled her into place and left.

Fu went to the old woman's side and laid a hand on her shoulder. Angela Spelling listened as Fu said something and then responded. There was no sound to the video, and Jayden was no lip-reader. Whatever was said, Fu smiled sweetly in return and pivoted to the small stand and picked the needle up from its silver tray. Jayden knew the procedure, but he'd only seen it once before, start to finish, during orientation for new employees. He winced as Fu injected the cocktail of drugs into Angela Spelling's frail arm. The old woman sighed deeply. Fu left her side and moved to the computer, where her fingers danced lightly on the keyboard. Her face turned toward the door, and Jayden leaned forward, following her gaze. Yet no one entered the room. Fu continued her preparations.

Several minutes later, Fu approached the gurney again and performed the auditory and manual tests to ensure the patient was under. When Angela Spelling failed to respond, Fu pressed the button on the wall. As the hood slid slowly into place, Fu gave Angela's hand a final squeeze.

That was it. Ananda never showed up. Jayden watched the procedure unfold, with Fu initiating the automated sequence. He watched Fu's eyes widen, and then she was all over her keyboard, trying to resolve. Then he held his breath as she hit the com and called him. Her lips moved as she spoke to him. He couldn't hear her, of course, but he remembered what she'd said. *She's in pieces. I was uploading her and I don't know what happened, but it didn't work.*

She stood there breathing raggedly. He remembered taking charge, asking her to go check the body. On the screen, Fu's body straightened, and she complied, sliding the hood from Angela Spelling's head.

He hit pause and sat back. If it weren't for the tricked-up log, and Team Black practically asking him if he was working for another faction, he'd be ready to admit his mind was making up a conspiracy that wasn't there. Ananda had worked late, maybe even falling asleep at his desk. And coincidentally that same night, an upload had run into a massive problem.

I don't know what happened, but it didn't work.

What didn't work? He'd assumed the standard upload procedure. But nothing about fixing Angela that night had been standard. He tapped the top of his desk, staring at Fu's frozen image. He hit the key to back up the video to when Fu had first entered the room. Then he hit run.

There she was again, leaving Angela's side to work at the computer. Then at the computer, glancing up, toward the door. This time, instead of following her gaze to the empty doorway, Jayden kept his eyes on Fu. Her hand was resting in the right-hand pocket of her lab coat. Jayden's brow wrinkled as she removed the hand from her pocket and kept working.

Whoa there. He backed up the video and then inched forward a frame at a time. In stop motion fashion, he saw Fu take her hand out of her pocket, and touch it to the side of the computer. She was holding something in that hand.

Jayden backed up several frames again and zoomed in and replayed the footage frame by frame. The images were grainy as hell, thanks again to the antiquated security system, but he didn't need to see an object that familiar very clearly. Fu's hand emerged from her pocket holding a USB flash drive, and she inserted it into the port on the side of the computer.

The level of guilt Fu had shown—that hadn't been normal. He could see that now. And she hadn't come into work at all on Monday. She'd been deeply shaken.

"Fu," he said. "What did you do?"

He keyed to fast forward, then slowed again as Fu hailed him for assistance. Now that he knew what to look for, it was obvious. After she spoke to him initially, before she turned away to go check on Angela Spelling's body, she briefly touched the side of the computer again. And as she walked across the room, she put that hand in her lab coat pocket. Whatever was on that drive, she'd taken it with her.

Jayden cursed and swiped at his eyes. He'd been living in a fog for far too long. He didn't even know the people around him, who they really were and what they were capable of.

He heard a noise close behind him. That robot was the last straw. "Gig, would you stop sneaking up—"

He wheeled around and his words turned into a grunt of surprise. He knocked over his chair as he stumbled to his feet. He was face to face with Ananda. "Have you seen what you wanted to see?" the programmer asked.

Ananda was too close, invading his space. Plus, Jayden didn't like that half-smile on his face one bit. He shoved Ananda back, making him stumble and fall onto the floor. "What did you and Fu do to Angela Spelling?"

That's when he noticed Fu, hanging back by one of the server aisles, eyes wide and hand to her mouth. Something inside him stirred.

"Trust me," she said. "There was no way to tell you about anything before now. Jayden, I'm so sorry."

Jayden took a couple of steps forward over Ananda, still on the floor. The programmer raised an arm in defense. "Assault is against company policy."

"Jayden," Fu said, her voice soft, apologetic. "You weren't supposed to be involved. When the upload failed, Ananda was supposed to have fixed it. But . . . it was complicated. I had to call you instead."

"It was a job for Wonder Boy," Ananda said. Trying for humor.

Stunned at the level of conspiracy, Jayden felt reality slide sideways. When he spoke, his voice sounded hollow in his ears. "I can't believe you two would attempt to introduce a virus Inside. Against someone's consent."

Ananda scooted away from Jayden and rose cautiously to his feet. "Virus? Is that what you thought it was?"

Jayden stared.

Fu took a step toward Jayden. "Do you really believe what you separated from Angela Spelling last week was a computer virus?"

Tears sprang to Jayden's eyes, and he hated himself for it. "I . . . I don't know."

Fu's eyes were glistening, too. She kept walking slowly toward him. "Do you think the Insiders are truly happy the way they are right now?"

"You've been Inside on recon," he said. Why was he being so defensive? But this whole thing was starting to feel a lot like the meeting with Team Black and Harriet McBride.

"I'm asking you what *you* see," Fu said gently.

Jayden shrugged. "Entities feel all the emotions. Happy, sad, bored, whatever. They sometimes flip from one emotion to another in a way that's odd, but they run on a different platform from us."

Ananda snorted. "A different *platform*? You're messed up in the head, Jayden."

Jayden smiled wryly, an expression that made him feel more normal, in the midst of this bizarre situation. "Who's to say we're not a simulation, too? Anyway, Insiders do everything they used to do in life."

Fu shook her head. "Not everything. Not even the half of it. They're endless do-loops of memory."

Harsh. "Cartesian . . . is trying to express more of himself. And Angela." His shoulders sagged. "Angela is wildly popular because maybe she has a residual marker from the mystery file I cut away from her on upload. Man, how many times am I going to explain this today?"

Ananda startled. "What do you mean, how many times? Who've you been talking to?"

Jayden blinked. "Team Black. And Harriet McBride."

Fu gasped. "Is that what they wanted to talk about?"

Ananda sprang to his feet and cursed. "Them and their lifestyle. Since Version 2.0, they've been working to keep things *from* happening." He ran to the elevators.

"Sorry?" Should he apologize? He turned to Fu. "I'd begun to think Team Black were the ones that set all this up. But in my meeting with them today, I realized it wasn't them that did this. Anyway, I didn't tell them anything. Really."

"Gig!" Ananda called, pushing at the elevator buttons. "I need you to come lock this elevator so no one can come down here."

The robot whirred by on its way to assist. Jayden felt a little jealous about Ananda giving orders to Gig, as if it were entirely commonplace.

He turned back to Fu. "I saw you take a zip drive out of your pocket and upload something along with Angela. Without even asking her." His words were meant to be accusing, but his tone sounded more like he was begging her. God, he was so conflicted.

There was a lift to Fu's chin that lent an air of defiance. "She knew, Jayden. Angela Spelling was the one who *gave* me the file."

"What?" He stared as Fu pursed her lips and nodded. "So Ananda didn't . . . ?"

"Ananda didn't do the programming." A low laugh burst from her lips. "He's good, but he isn't *that* good."

Jayden found it hard to believe Angela had been involved. She'd been a librarian, not a computer programmer. And she'd been so old and frail.

Fu saw his confusion. "It's not really a program, anyway. It's a machine learning protocol with an algorithm." She cleared her throat. "From Chicago."

Chicago? A chill crept up the back of his neck. Chicago was where it had all started, with human minds uploaded into sophisticated robots. Later, because of the conflicts living among people, the machine humans had developed a way to live inside their own virtual world. What had they designed for themselves? Without Team Black and lifestyle to keep them . . . what? Human? A chill seemed to descend on the room.

Jayden looked down the row of servers, where he glimpsed the image of Alisa walking away, dissolving against the hard metal of the equipment. "I'm a nut case," he remarked flatly. "I saw Angela Spelling become something . . . more . . . than she'd been in life."

Fu nodded. "She spun way beyond the intended effect. It was too much to integrate the protocol into her personal folder."

Ananda and Gig, having secured the elevator, joined Jayden and Fu. "So are you with us?" the programmer asked.

Fu smiled hopefully. "We could use your help. Are you in or are you out?"

Even Gig looked interested in Jayden's answer.

Ananda glanced back at the elevators. "Look, we need to do this now. You're stuck here anyway." He approached Jayden's computer station and righted the tipped-over chair. "Team Black is making me nervous. May I?" He sat down without waiting for Jayden to respond.

Jayden watched the back of Ananda's head as the programmer logged in. He didn't like other people touching his equipment, especially his notebook computer. His whole space had been invaded. He was speechless.

Fu moved so she could see over Ananda's shoulder as he worked. "Is it ready?"

Ananda typed furiously. "It passed the non-live simulation last night. Ready as we're ever going to be."

Jayden's curiosity finally seized the upper hand. "Is what ready?"

Ananda looked up and scanned the cavernous room. "You have a nice setup here, undertaker. This is perfect."

"Is *what* ready?"

Ananda grinned. "Are you in, then? Because if not, we'll have to have Gig tie you up."

It was either these two, or Team Black. Jayden yelled a string of obscenities, which cleared his head. "I have zero idea what you're going to do, or why you decided to come down here to do it. I have no idea how two separate factions even developed inside this company, or if you're

a couple of mavericks going against corporate policy. But . . .” He ran a hand through his hair. “I’m in.”

Fu clapped her hands in delight. Ananda looked up at him from Jayden’s chair and grinned. “You won’t regret this, Wonder Boy.”

Fu seemed to understand his need for information better than Ananda. “We’re down here so we have access to recon suits, and Team Black is likely not to come looking for us here. Not right away.” She hesitated. “We’re not acting entirely on our own on this.”

Everything she said begat multiple questions. He couldn’t possibly catch up to it all. “Tell me one more thing right now,” Jayden demanded. “Where is the file I put in quarantine?”

Ananda and Fu looked at each other.

Jayden shouted at them. “Where is it?!”

Ananda raised an eyebrow. “Well, it’s been modified since you cut it out of Angela’s folder. Nice work that was, too.”

Jayden put his hands on his hips. He made his voice very quiet. “And?”

Ananda was warming to his story. “And a bunch of us were on the phone with Chicago for the past few days, figuring out how we were going to deploy this thing onto our platform in a way that would give the Insiders a deeper, more enriched and yes, *soulful* experience, without going completely transhuman.”

He looked at Jayden. “Believe me, it was kind of hard to convince Chicago we wanted some limits. They are one weird bunch.”

Jayden stared at him, remembering Ananda working late on the tech floor. “And?”

Fu winked at him. “Gig. Open wide.”

There was a whir as Jayden turned to look at the robot, standing between Fu and Ananda’s chair. His first thought was, *I didn’t know Gig had a tongue*. Then he realized what was emerging from the slit of Gig’s mouth was a compact storage drive.

He turned back to his colleagues, who were clearly enjoying the moment. “Sure. The quarantined file.”

“For safekeeping,” Ananda said smoothly, holding out his right hand. “I’ll take that now, thanks.”

Jayden gently pulled the storage device from Gig’s silver head. He stared at it for a moment and then placed it in Ananda’s outstretched hand.

“What is it?” he asked. “What is it, really?”

“It’s the antidote to *lifestyle*,” Fu said, waving air quotes to show her contempt. “Team Black has been holding the Insiders back.”

Ananda turned and started working at Jayden’s station. “This is their hope for a fuller life. Angela was to act as the delivery mechanism for the add-on—she volunteered—but it ended up being incompatible with our platform.”

Jayden stared at the back of Ananda’s head. “You don’t say?”

Ananda chose to ignore the sarcasm. “We made modifications to make it accessible without trying to attach it to people’s folders.” He swiveled around in the chair. “It’s a game now.”

Fu nodded. “We turned it into a serious game. A simulation that allows entities to experience the content safely.”

Jayden looked at her. “We?”

She laughed and blushed, which Jayden thought made her the prettiest woman he’d ever seen. “I’ve been studying computer programming, and taking all PHI’s classes. I don’t want to stay a procedure room tech forever. But really, at times I just watched Ananda and Sarah work on it. They’re awesome.”

Jayden raised his eyebrows. Sarah was a part of this, too? Somehow, knowing that made him feel more comfortable about his choice. He was part of a larger group.

Ananda swiveled back to face the monitor. “It takes a village to execute a project like this. Speaking of which, I’m glad there’s two of you now that can suit up and go Inside to observe and report out.”

Gig had whisked away on an errand. Jayden looked around and saw it rolling back toward

them from the cabinets, holding an entire VR outfit aloft in each of its metallic hands.

“What were you going to do if I’d said no to helping you?” he asked, as Gig handed the larger size set to Jayden.

Ananda was loading the game. “Already told you. Have Gig tie you up. Using the tethers.”

Gig was helping Fu with her gear, beginning with fastening the shoulder pads on, from which the arm and finger controls dangled like a broken robot puppet. Jayden ended up sitting on the floor to strap on his lower body gear, as Ananda continued to commandeer the workstation.

“I don’t understand how Insiders can play a game and somehow grow as a result,” he said.

“Ryoca,” Fu said as she balanced on one foot while Gig helped her with her lower body gear. “Redesign your own cognitive algorithms.”

Jayden paused as he donned his own shoulder pads. “Well, I do know about that. It’s how an entity figures out how to coalesce into virtual form.”

“Yes,” she said, checking her fingertip controls. “You’ve done recon, Jayden. You’ve seen all they do is the familiar things they’ve done in life, and when they get together they tell old stories that access their stored memories. The serious game is a catalyst. When Insiders experience it, it’ll launch a collective redesign of themselves and their environment.”

Jayden’s mouth went dry as he remembered what Angela Spelling had become. “Redesign into what?”

Fu was allowing Gig to lower her helmet into place. “We’re giving them the means to create a deeper experience. To become more human.”

“What I saw Friday night wasn’t exactly human,” he said.

Ananda swiveled around and cast him an appraising look. “Are you having second thoughts?”

Did he have a choice? He supposed he did. He could tear off his gear, fight his way up out of the deeps, alert Sharon and Team Black there was a serious breach of the servers with an illegal file from Chicago. And what? Restore order.

I am was Angela. He’d heard the intelligence in that altered voice. I’ve burst into existence only now, from the seed state of humanity. I am an unfurling of self from the enfolded places into something greater.

He’d torn that away from her. It was time she got it back, hopefully in a more manageable way than the first attempt. Dare they trust Chicago and themselves that it would work? What alternative did they have?

“I’m good,” he said. “Let’s do this.”

Ananda flashed a thumbs-up and turned back to his work. Jayden saw Ananda was only using monitor two but had split the screen into three sections. He wanted to see more, but Gig was wrapping him in the tethers. He looked over at Fu who was a meter away. She was already wrapped up, and with her helmet on, she couldn’t see him. He thought she looked a little like a robot, herself, one inside a cocoon. Harriet McBride’s words came back to him. Could greater freedom for the entities mean greater risk of becoming something that was no longer human?

“Gig?”

“Yes, Jayden.”

“Why are you helping us? Instead of . . . doing what corporate would want? Stop us?”

The robot was holding Jayden’s helmet. It paused, holding it aloft in metallic arms that telescoped to reach the top of Jayden’s head.

“This is life advantaging,” it replied. “I am programmed to promote that trajectory.”

Jayden looked into those cobalt blue eyes, searching for . . . what? A flicker of awareness? “And protecting the file as you have?”

The robot set the helmet over Jayden’s head, cutting off his vision. “Life advantaging.”

“For you, too?”

There was a pause. “Optimization is the correct term for my trajectory.”

Jayden listened to the soft whir as the robot rolled away.

Ananda broke into his thoughts. “Okay, our serious game is about to go live.”

Jayden could hear the sound of quick, efficient typing at the keyboard. Then Ananda’s voice again. “Are you ready?”

“Okay to go,” Fu called out.

A green light flashed in the lower left corner of Jayden’s vision. He shook off his unease. He’d chosen which side to join. “Roger that,” he replied.

Then came the sensation of moving forward rapidly, and the world Inside burst forth from a pinpoint of light and enfolded him into its reality of blueprint specifications and transparent objects.

* * *

He hadn’t been Inside on recon with another person since Xiaoli had taken him on a final walkabout at the end of his apprenticeship. Fu was recognizable, without the anonymous wrappings of her VR outfit. Her form was outlined in red, the means by which a recon crew could readily distinguish between its members and the Insiders. Otherwise they themselves appeared as sketched versions, as did the entities.

Fu located him and waved. “All good?”

He could hear her clearly because they were standing close to each other back in the deeps. “I’m fine,” he replied. He looked around. They were in the middle of a street full of people milling about. “Do you know where the game is deploying?”

Ananda’s voice sounded like the voice of a god. “It’s in the university building. Top floor. It’s ready to go, but it doesn’t look like it’s been discovered yet.”

Jayden cursed. “That’s because no one hangs out in the university building.”

Ananda’s voice was filled with frustration. “Really? No joke?”

Jayden set his jaw. “They can’t learn. They’re over in the bars, swapping old stories.”

Fu laughed ruefully. “Who do we know that’ll throw a party there?”

“I’m not moving it,” Ananda said. There was a distinctly defensive tone in his voice.

Jayden smiled. “Let’s see if we can enlist Angela.”

He watched as Fu stared blankly, consulting her information screen. “She’s in her folder. She’s been there . . . ever since your recon yesterday.”

“Ouch. Let’s go.”

“Both of us? Maybe we should split up and—”

“Yes, both of us. She needs to see you, too. She remembers you.”

“See me?”

Jayden didn’t have time to explain. He went to file view, with the rows of what looked like coffins, and was pleased to see Fu had followed him there. They both navigated to Angela’s private world and tapped to access it.

Angela was still reading in her chair, but now there were two tall stacks of books to each side of her. The aisles between the shelves were littered with books as well, as if they’d been picked up, perused and discarded. Yet the shelves themselves remained full.

“This isn’t good,” Jayden said.

Fu sighed. “It wasn’t good when I saw she’d been in her folder this long. We should go. We’re on a mission.”

Jayden started walking toward Angela in her chair. “This *is* our mission. Check her invitations.”

He heard Fu’s gasp, confirming they were still all there, unread. Then, “What are you doing?”

He’d reached the chair and knelt down in front of Angela. “Making myself available when she takes her nose out of that book.”

“Insiders can’t see us.” Fu sounded like she was talking to a small child.

“Angela saw me during my last recon. Briefly. Then she seemed to forget I was there. Come over here by me. She asked about you last time.”

“Asked . . . ?”

“There’s no interface for her to hear us, of course,” Jayden said, gently mimicking Fu’s earlier tone.

Fu edged closer to Angela’s chair, looking warily around at every step. “I don’t like the looks of this at all, but I agree that if we can get her out of here, they’ll follow her wherever she goes.”

Angela lowered the book to turn the page. Jayden was startled to find gray streaking her hair

and prominent laugh lines around her eyes. She was no longer young, but middle-aged.

Those eyes found him, and she squinted as if to get a better look. Her smile was one of nostalgia. "I must be dreaming," she said in a voice that seemed to creak from disuse. She coughed. "It's been so long since I've seen you. How many weeks?"

Jayden shrugged. He didn't try to do the math converting outside time to Inside time. Instead, he pointed at Fu. Angela shifted her gaze and broke out in a delighted smile.

"Young lady! My, I can't believe I still remember you, but I do. And you haven't aged at all." She touched her brow. "Funny, I had the idea I shouldn't have aged. Isn't that unusual? Then again, you're a ghost, so you would look just as I remember you."

Jayden's heart was breaking. Angela Spelling had most certainly deteriorated. He was at a loss.

Fu started searching the books on the shelves. "Oh, wait, what am I doing? These are representations for the interface into the library. I can access it here." She tapped on her forearm pad.

"What are you doing?"

"Communicating. Here, let's see if this works." She approached Angela's chair, smiling reassuringly. Then she tapped on her forearm pad and pointed to the top book on the tall stack to Angela's right.

Angela rose from her chair. "What do you want me to see?" Jayden was relieved her movements at least were without the limitations of age. Why had she chosen an older face?

Angela took down the book Fu indicated, and looked at the cover. "*Metamorphosis*, by Franz Kafka. Yes, that's a great story."

Fu tapped on her forearm pad and pointed to the next book. Angela was still holding the Kafka story, but she read the spine. "*Paradiso*." She squinted at Fu. "You're trying to tell me something, aren't you? Well, I've never read Dante, but I'd have to say that in my case I feel more like *Paradise Lost*."

"Tell her she really needs to get out more," Jayden said.

Angela followed Fu's gaze to Jayden. "You both seem so familiar, but I can't remember."

"Uh oh," Fu murmured. "They can slip around so quickly. We need to keep her focused if we're going to get anywhere."

Jayden kept looking at Angela so her attention wouldn't wander again and gestured to her portal to Inside.

Angela shook her head. "It's so confusing out there. Everyone wants to see me, but I don't know why." She chuckled. "I'm no movie star."

Her brow furrowed. "But it seems I'm forgetting something. Maybe I've been trying to find out what it could be in these books." She looked down at *Metamorphosis* in her hands.

Something clicked. Jayden tapped his own forearm controls to access the library. He switched the title on the representation of the book that Angela held.

She blinked at the abrupt change and then read the title. "A Tree, A Rock, A Cloud." She paused, then continued. "By Carson McCullers."

She looked up, eyes wide. "'A tree, a rock, a cloud.' I *remember* that. Our conversation."

Jayden almost dared not breathe. "Fu, come with me to Angela's portal. Nice and slow."

Fu followed his lead. "What's this about?"

Jayden kept nodding encouragement to Angela, who was following them as if sleepwalking. "I don't quite get it, but it's the name of a story that she remembered when she was . . . expanded."

As if in response, Angela started murmuring. "The young boy didn't understand anything the older man said, but he knew he was witnessing something big. Larger than his capacity to process it. Like I did, before I lost it."

She looked up and down the rows of scattered books. "I've been looking for it a long time." She suddenly rushed forward, toward the portal, and in her movement the façade of the older woman gave way. Fu startled, but of course she hadn't ever seen the much younger Angela Spelling. Jayden had, though, and he was relieved.

"We are all just children at the shore," Angela said, pausing to clear away the avalanche of invitations. She laughed. "That's from a poem I wrote when I was still young. We're all just

children, still. Every one of us.

“Come my ghosts of Christmas Yet to Come,” she smiled, her hand on the portal. “Point the way and assure me that I yet may change these shadows you have shown me, by an altered life.”

* * *

Angela stepping Inside wasn't an actual emergence from one place to another, but an opening of her permissions to interface with the community Inside. A throng quickly formed around her. Ten, twenty, and suddenly fifty people were drawn like iron filings to a magnet. People jostled each other, tried to touch her, and shouted all manner of personal questions. Jayden found it disconcerting, but Angela smiled serenely. She wasn't just tolerant of the attention but seemed genuinely interested in everyone as she followed Jayden and Fu—her invisible guides—to the university building.

“You think I'm special?” she asked to a roar of cheers. “You are each special. Come, let's discover what there is to see and to become.”

Cartesian emerged out of the crowd. “We're so thrilled you're here,” he said, taking Angela's hand. “Dare we think your presence holds promise for a breakthrough? We've all been dreaming of one. Ever since you arrived.”

Angela turned in to the university building, pausing at the large doors, where Jayden and Fu were standing, unseen by the throng. “I sing the Body electric.”

There were a few cheers, but most stood transfixed.

Angela threw her arms wide. “The armies of those I love engirth me, and I engirth them.”

A din of cheers erupted, and Cartesian took her hand gingerly and kissed it. Then he said, “They will not let me off till I go with them, respond to them, and disconcert them, and charge them full with the charge of the Soul!” Those words are Walt Whitman's, who is long dead, but their promise is for today.”

With that, Angela and Cartesian led the way into the university building. Jayden and Fu found themselves in the middle of a wave of Insiders surging past them and through them. Although they were no longer leading her, Angela was heading in the right direction, up the grand staircase to the second floor.

“They're coming, Ananda,” Jayden said.

“I hope you're ready for company,” Fu said. “We have maybe three hundred coming in.”

Ananda's disembodied voice was approving. “I don't know what you did, but this is excellent. The more the merrier.”

Jayden paused, the tide rushing through and past him. “Are you sure? I mean, what happened to a small trial?”

“Small, large, it makes no difference. It's against all the regulations to run a test environment Inside.” Ananda's voice was chiding. “This is why we've been at a standstill.”

There was a pause. “It's happening. They're engaging in the game.”

Fu and Jayden ran up the stairs and saw the space had expanded. The second floor had become a single cavernous room. That was a feature of the virtual environment, to expand and shrink spaces as needed to accommodate the numbers of participants.

“Let me know if I need to shut it down,” Ananda said. “I'm your kill switch in case things get weird.”

Jayden wondered what would be considered weird. Waves of sound and color pulsed around the space. The scene was vaguely reminiscent of a dance club, but the sound was not music. It was the inorganic sound Jayden had heard last Friday over his speakers, before Angela Spelling had coalesced into human form. At the time he'd thought of it as a cross between electronica and whale song. That had been an inadequate description, but he was at a loss to describe it any better now. The colors, transparent and nebula-like, surged and flowed over and through the Insiders in synch with the sounds.

Fu cursed under her breath. Jayden had never heard her swear. “It's okay,” he said. “At least, it resembles what Angela became last Friday. Except now they're retaining their human forms.”

It was true. The Insiders weren't melting into the flow but were interacting with it. Dancing had erupted among a few here and there. But the most striking thing about the crowd was a

new radiance in their expressions, a *presence* that had been lacking before.

“Look, Fu,” he said. “They’re more alive.”

Fu’s voice broke. “Yes, they are. In all the recons, we knew something was missing. Why didn’t we report it?”

Ananda’s disembodied voice answered. “You were taught not to notice.”

Jayden glimpsed Angela through the weaving bodies. She was still with Cartesian, and she was handing him something. As he took it, they shared a lingering gaze that made Jayden feel he was intruding. It wasn’t the intimacy of lovers, but one of intelligence and . . . conspiracy?

He signaled to Fu and pointed. “Angela gave Cartesian something.”

She nodded. “I’m going to zoom out and get a better look.”

“Folder view?”

She was already tapping on her forearm. “Not yet. Fifty meters straight up. So we can look down at the crowd.”

Jayden had never thought to do that. Fu had some mad skills, clearly. He followed her lead. As he rose upward, he felt a thrill at the pit of his stomach. He’d passed his recon apprenticeship of course, but now he felt like he could’ve used more training.

It honestly felt good to get above the crowd and away from the all-encompassing simulation as well. He found himself floating next to Fu, looking down through the roof of the university at the throng. He laughed at the novelty. “I didn’t know we could do this.”

Fu chuckled. “Okay, I need you to focus right now. Look down at the gathering.”

He did, and whistled low through his teeth. “This is one massive party.”

The university building had expanded to many times its regular size in order to accommodate the entities that continued to pour in. The simulation had grown as well.

“Wow.” He didn’t have words for this.

Ananda’s disembodied voice spoke up from back in the deeps. “What’s going on? Is everything okay?”

Fu was making scroll and select gestures in the air as she accessed her information bar. Jayden was impressed with how she was able to keep her head. “Over two thousand entities now engaged in the serious game,” she reported. “Fast approaching one-third of the populace. This is truly amazing how they’ve created so large a collective event.”

Jayden looked at her in profile. “They had parties before,” he said.

Fu continued watching the crowd below. “Yes, but the large ones were all scheduled by Team Black. This is the first major event of their own creation.”

Jayden didn’t necessarily agree with that sentiment. After all, they had installed the serious game here. But he let it slide. “I saw Angela give Cartesian something,” he reminded her.

“Right.” Fu tore herself away from the scene. “Let’s go to folder view.”

They punched in simultaneously. Jayden was glad for the company. The rows of coffin-like file folders that housed the entities were a disturbing sight after the lively scene at the university.

Fu had already located Angela’s folder. “She checks out okay.” She gestured and then gasped. “But Cartesian . . .”

Jayden, tapping to catch up with what Fu was finding, looked out over the rows of folders again and caught his breath.

“Some of us can’t see what’s going on,” Ananda called from the deeps. “Is everything okay?”

“It’s beautiful,” Jayden said, mesmerized.

Over the landscape of coffins was a shimmering silver arch, transparent as a rainbow. Fu, who’d been engrossed in whatever was in Cartesian’s folder, looked up and gasped.

“What’s beautiful?” Ananda asked.

Fu’s voice was soft. “Angela shared something of herself with Cartesian. There was an exchange of a packet of information, from one folder to another. She . . . copied a memory and sent it to his folder.”

Jayden, trying to catch up, scrolled through his own information bar.

Fu continued explaining. “They worked out permissions for the exchange. This is remarkable.”

"I don't get it." Ananda sounded distracted. "They tell stories all the time."

"This is different," Fu insisted. "They've developed a way to share pieces of themselves!"

Jayden dialed in to Cartesian's folder and entered that entity's private world. It was like stepping outside. There were trees, and sunlight, and a cityscape. Cartesian was swinging in an old-fashioned playground swing. He watched his little legs rise to touch the skyscrapers, and then back down, where the grass had become a blur. Then back up again. The little legs were those of an African-American girl of about eight, wearing ivory-colored sandals that were covered with dust. Jayden had no doubt those were Angela Spelling's legs as a little girl. As if in confirmation, he heard a sing-song voice. "I'mma rise to the sky/Lookin' so fly/Goin' brave the air/Dare to be there."

"It's a part of him, now," Jayden said. "Cartesian can run the memory as if it were his own."

Yet there was something about this moment that was about more than a girl swinging. It reached forward in time. He became aware of Angela as a teenager, graduating with honors from Girls' High, second in her class. She'd thought back to this moment as she stepped forward to receive her diploma. Touch the sky, girl, she'd said back to her younger self.

Another jump forward—or rather, outward—and he was aware of a dozen moments at once that fed into this memory. There were times of failure or despair, and times of success and happiness. Each time, Angela Spelling had comforted herself, or encouraged herself, by going back to the little girl swinging and chanting. She'd never married, never had kids of her own. She'd lectured at librarian conferences, had raised funds for a new library in inner city Philly and then in Chicago. *I'mma rise to the sky*. The last of those times had been as she'd held Fu's hand, there in procedure room one, and slipped her the forbidden file. He'd failed to notice that part in the video he'd replayed, and he was relieved to see Fu's account corroborated. Angela Spelling had outlived the rest of her family, but she wasn't done yet. *Goin' brave the air*. She'd been committed to a cause, to bring a deeper dimension of life to the Insiders of the PHI Center. *Dare to be there*.

He understood now why Angela had chosen this memory to share with Cartesian. It was the perfect anthem to inspire the entities to a new way of being. But how had she known? Who had contacted her?

He was only dimly aware of Fu and Ananda talking back and forth. What would it be like if he could relive Alisa's memories like this? Her spirit should have been preserved. She would've been here, if she hadn't been gunned down at the peace rally in Austin, along with eighteen other innocent people. She'd been too far from Houston to get her in alive, to upload her, preserve her until this could happen.

Yet Alisa would live forever, through his memories, a packet of sorts.

He became aware of new sounds. Shouting. For a second, he thought he was listening to the sounds of shouting in Austin that day, at the peace rally. Then he realized the sounds were coming from Outside. He boosted out of Cartesian's folder. "Fu!"

She was with him in folder view. One look at her expression, and he knew she'd heard the shouts, too. "Jayden. What's going on? Ananda! Ananda!"

She suddenly winked out. Someone had pulled her plug. He blinked and found himself floundering in the elastic tethers that translated his body's impulses into movement in the virtual world Inside. He struggled to free his arms enough to pull off his helmet and finally managed it.

Was Team Black trying to shut them down? Yet the first thing he saw was Sal speaking to Ananda, who was sitting frozen in his chair. He'd never seen Sal be anything other than a friendly face at the security checkpoint, but the way she was barking directions in a crisp clear voice told him she was in charge. She noticed Jayden right away and turned toward him, her body slightly angled, weight on her back foot, hands forward. "Jayden, I need you to lower that helmet. Nice and slow."

What was he going to do? Throw it at Sal's head? He complied.

"Now let go of it and let it drop to the floor," she said.

He did so, wincing as the equipment landed with a cracking noise. He hoped he hadn't broken it.

He glanced over at Fu. She was standing with arms raised, helmet still on, unable to see anything. She was repeating something over and over. "Call Bert Foster. Please call Bert Foster." The name was familiar, but Jayden couldn't think who that was.

There was another security guard standing on the other side of her, a Latino guy who Jayden had never seen before. When he moved around Fu and approached Jayden, his unbuttoned jacket gaped open, and Jayden saw the dull grey of a gun handle resting in the strap of his shoulder holster. He looked around. There was no sign of Team Black anywhere.

"Look at me," Sal said in a firm, authoritative tone that commanded Jayden's attention instantly. "Now we're going to round ourselves up and go where we can get this all straightened out."

Jayden caught a glimpse of Ananda, who winked at him. He looked back at Sal, less afraid. They'd already accomplished their mission. No one was at the computer station trying to shut down their serious game. They may as well cooperate. His only regret was the three of them would certainly be fired. Could they be charged with anything criminal?

"Please call Bert Foster," Fu repeated, still unable to see anything. "I have his cell number in my phone in my front left pocket. He'll be able to explain."

Sal pushed her cap back on her head. "*The Bert Foster?*"

Gig suddenly rolled up out of nowhere and released Fu's tethers in a few quick motions. Fu reached into her pocket and pulled out her phone. The guard standing next to Jayden tensed and put a hand on his gun.

Fu pressed her thumb against the screen. "Call Bert."

Her phone responded. "Calling Bert."

Sal and the Latino guy shifted awkwardly as they listened to the phone ring. Fu had it set on speaker. As they waited, Jayden remembered where he'd heard the name before. Bert Foster was the founder of the PHI Center. Post-Human Incorporated. It was crazy that Fu could reach him so casually.

Just when he thought the call would go to voice mail, a man answered. "Ms. Yu."

Fu closed her eyes momentarily. "Hi, Mr. Foster." Her voice was full of relief.

The man's voice was calm, measured. "Do you have something to tell me?"

"Yes," she said. "It worked."

There was a pause. "Did it, now? That's good. Very good news. Well done. Best to Mr. Ananda Kapoor as well."

Fu looked at Ananda, then at Jayden. "I'm here with Jayden, too. And some others."

"Is everything all right?"

"Security is here," she said, and flushed. "I'm sorry to impose, but . . ."

"Ah. There's been a misunderstanding. I was concerned about Mister . . . what is his name? Jayden . . . ?"

Fu looked at Jayden, mortified, and he realized she didn't know his last name. Jayden spoke up loud enough for Bert Foster to hear over the phone. "Jayden Hess, sir."

"Mr. Hess."

"I didn't call security on them," Jayden rushed to add.

"Jayden helped," Fu said. "He got through to Angela Inside. I don't think I could have."

"Oh," Bert said. "Then who called security?"

Everyone looked at Sal. "It was a breach alarm, sir," she said. "When I went to the elevators, I saw they were disabled, so I called Perez, and we took the stairs down."

Hand it to Sal for not being the least bit apologetic. Then Jayden realized what she'd said. They took the stairs down? To the deeps? That took stamina.

Bert's tone remained unruffled. "And when you arrived and saw these staff at work, you assumed they were conducting unauthorized activities."

It wasn't a question, but Sal answered. "We were asking some questions, sir. Trying to troubleshoot the situation."

"Well, good work. Good work all around."

Everyone looked at everyone else until Bert broke the silence again.

“That it?”

“Um, yes sir,” Fu said. “Thanks.”

“Well, good night, then.” He rang off.

Sal shrugged. “Okay. I’m going back upstairs to make my report. Coming, Perez?”

Gig rolled by. “I will unsecure the elevator for your use.” It rolled smoothly away.

Sal and Perez looked at the others.

“We locked the elevators,” Ananda said. “Part of the protocol for this project.”

Sal made a cynical sound in her throat, then tapped Perez on the shoulder. The guards followed after the robot.

Jayden started to say something, but Fu pressed a finger to her lips and nodded toward the departing guards. They waited till the elevator doors closed and they were all three alone again. Then he unloaded. “If Bert Foster was behind all this, why were you two sneaking around?”

Fu was studying her shoes. “Sometimes, when you know you need to take a great risk,” she explained, “you create a confidential project, and assign a small team to carry it out.”

Jayden crossed his arms over his chest. “And then if it fails, you deny your involvement.” He cursed Bert Foster and the founder’s entire ancestral line.

It was Fu’s turn to be perturbed. “It wasn’t like that. Besides, we succeeded.”

“That we did,” Ananda said. “But notice Mr. Foster didn’t exactly spill his guts admitting he’d sanctioned the project. Security’s report is going to read pretty blandly.”

Fu motioned for Gig to help her out of her recon suit. She seemed to be ignoring Ananda’s comment. Jayden stared at his helmet on the floor, wondering if it was broken. “Do you think we should do more recon? On good old Bert’s experiment?”

Ananda scrolled through the log. “The breach alarm triggered with the upload of our game,” he said. “It didn’t have anything to do with the Insiders.”

“So we’re just going to let them . . . play?”

Fu chuckled as Gig lifted the upper portion of her VR gear off. “Now you sound like Team Black. Any change Inside is call for a huge committee meeting. You can bet there will be a huge meeting tomorrow.”

Ananda smirked. “After Bert and Harriet’s private meeting, maybe. And by then, it’ll be too late to change the Insiders back.”

“And who would want to?” Fu added. “Jayden, you saw. They’re so much more themselves now. They’re not living in the past anymore. They’re creating, they’re growing. . . .”

Jayden pulled off his shoulder pads and set them down gingerly. Then he finished freeing himself from the rest of his gear. The Insiders weren’t the only ones who’d been living in the past. He was suddenly very tired.

Ananda popped to his feet, full of energy. “Let’s get out of here. Do you want to go get a drink somewhere? I mean, I myself don’t drink alcohol, but it would be fun to go somewhere and relax.”

Fu grinned. “Sure. Jayden, are you in?”

His fatigue was changing, inexplicably, leaving him feel like he could float across the room. Or touch the sky. He smiled. “Yeah. Sounds good.”

* * *

Thirty minutes later they were sitting at a high table at a place Fu had picked called Charlie’s. It was small and comfortable, and lively with locals who seemed to all know each other. The waiter delivered their drinks and they toasted their team’s success. Jayden sipped his beer and enjoyed the very human crowd.

Ananda took a swallow of his club soda. “You know we’re all going to get promoted,” he said. “I can feel it. You can’t possibly work on a Bert Foster secret project and not get promoted, right?”

Not long ago, Jayden had worried about the opposite happening: sudden unemployment. “Fu’s the one who really deserves it.” He raised his glass. “Man, you were awesome.”

They toasted, and Fu took a sip of her wine. “I hope I don’t have to work the rooms much longer. I’m tired of being executioner.”

ANALOG

Jayden winced. He'd never thought of it like that. But given his own nickname, the undertaker—

“Well, look who's here!”

He swung around at the familiar voice, and saw Tracey winding toward them, Debbie on her arm. He set down his beer, amazed at how dense he'd been not to see it before. Debbie was an important part of Tracey's life.

“Tracey, these are my colleagues—and friends—Fu and Ananda,” he said. “Friends, this is my sister, Tracey, and her girlfriend Debbie.”

Tracey grinned and gave Debbie a squeeze.

Fu smiled. “I didn't know Jayden had a sister. Hey, why don't you two join us?”

“Sure,” Ananda said. “You can tell us embarrassing stories about your brother.”

As they made room at the table, Jayden scooted his stool closer to Fu and caught a sidelong gleam in her eye. Then everyone was talking and joking. He looked around the table and realized this is what he'd been missing. Not just workplace ribbing when he happened to appear on the tech floor, but real relationships. He'd grabbed the lifeline of human connection himself, was focused outward again. He was out of the deeps for good.